

Just Press Send (Summit University Book 1)

Nikki Pierce

Complete



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Summary

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Description:

Eighteen-year-old Nat falls for five different boys during her first month at college, but never openly admits her crushes — until one night she drunk texts all five of them. She finds her freshman year turned upside down as she navigates the world of first love.

Nat keeps a list of all her crushes' pros and cons on her phone — the most logical thing to do for her list-making, highly organized brain. The lists were never meant to be shared, but when Ty, the school's star hockey player, dares Nat to tell the boys how she

feels, how could she back down from a drunken dare? The sober light of morning leaves Nat questioning her sanity when she sees three messages awaiting her response: the hot guy she met at a concert, the kind guy from orientation week, and the perfect guy from lit class. Now, Nat must confront her feelings for these boys face-to-face, or her chance at love will pass her by. In this story of firsts, what happens when Nat just presses send?

[[word count: 90,000 — 100,000]] Cover designed by Cil Ojumo

Paid Stories Announcement

Hello and welcome to Just Press Send!

First of all, I want to say thank you so much to everyone who has supported this book and continues to support it.

When I first started writing Nat's story a year ago as an escape, I never in my wildest dreams imagined that I'd find such an amazing, supportive community of fellow book lovers.

I'm so excited to announce that **Just Press Send will be entering the Paid Stories program on January 5th, 2022**, which is ohmysweetgoodness amazing because being paid for my writing will allow me to have more time to write the Summit University series. The first couple chapters will be free to read, then the rest will be available through purchase. The rest of the Summit University series will remain free to read.

To celebrate, I wrote some new & expanded scenes (check out chapter 17 & 28😊)!

If you wanna chat with me, my DM's are open—I'm always happy to answer questions and talk about

reading or writing with anyone.

But, most of all, I want to say thank you. Thank **you** for taking a chance with my book.

Trailer & Cast

Trailer

<https://youtu.be/uC5mGRYXVKw>

Music: Over My Head // Asher

What do you think of the trailer? Are you excited to read? Do you have any feedback for me?

Cast

I want you to be involved in the process of casting the characters of JPS! As you read and meet each character, come back to this and make an in-line comment with ***your*** suggestion. Or, if you agree with someone else, reply to their comment so I can see who's most popular.

In Order Of Appearance

Natasha Chabra

Tyler Sawyer

Mia Chabra

Rhea Chabra

Richard Davis

Layla Umaru

Pablo Ramirez

Alec Ito-Russell

Will Cho

Micah Miller

Blake Hill

Emily Cardinal

Colby Scott

Logan Kalua

And that's everyone! I'm so excited to hear your suggestions.

Epigraph

“ Man can do what he wills, but he cannot will
what he wills. ”

—Arthur Schopenhauer

1 | The Bathroom Incident

Everyone knows how awkward it is to take a shit in public, but how about taking a shit in public while two people are going at it in a shower stall five feet away? Yeah. Too awkward for words to describe.

Five minutes ago, I strolled into the washroom, and the door swung shut behind me. The shower was running, squeaking, probably because they hadn't been updated since this dorm was built ages ago. The counter might have been yellowing, but it was clean, so I plopped my things onto it, blissfully unaware. I locked the stall behind me and dropped my pink flannel pants.

A hint of a moan rose up from the general direction of the showers.

I stared at the tiled floor, eyebrows squished together. Someone must've really been enjoying their shower. But who was I to judge? I habitually bawled my eyes out in the shower. My brows relaxed as I leaned back and crossed my ankles.

“Harder, baby!” squealed a high pitched voice. It was followed by an... enthusiastic moan.

A flush of adrenaline tingled through me. I let out a bark of laughter.

There were two other people in the adjoining showers making sounds that were clearly not normal shower sounds. Were those even normal sex sounds? Maybe my university decided to film a porno in the showers without telling anyone. At this point, that seemed more likely than this scenario.

She moaned louder over the spray of the shower.

I blinked rapidly, then openly stared at the motivational quote slapped on the blue door of the stall, likely by my RA.

Life is not a fairy tale. If you lose your shoe at midnight, you're drunk.

I rolled my eyes. This was not happening right now. Instead of staring at useless quotes, I needed to hightail it out of here without running into Romeo and Juliet.

“Oh my God!” She gasped.

My chest tightened. I pulled in, then slowly released a deep breath.

I just needed to dash out of the stall, wash my hands (because ew, who doesn't wash their hands), and speed walk back to the safety of my dorm room, avoiding all conflict.

Easy, right?

Well, if there were space in the small stall, I would've been pacing. "Just do it," I said under my breath and in one fluid motion, unlocked the stall. The door swung open.

The steady stream of water screeched to a halt.

My already racing heart was about to explode. Body ready to bolt, my leg muscles tightened. Shit!

I rushed to the sink, movements jerky. Turn on faucet. Ouch, hot. Wrong handle. Press soap dispenser. Wash hands as quickly as humanly possible and—

The curtain separating the showers from the sinks, toilets, and urinals was pulled back, revealing a girl from down the hall. She gave a broad smile and adjusted the towel covering all her important bits.

"Oh, hey Nat," she said.

My face, neck, and ears became impossibly hot, and hands froze in place under the stream of water. I tried to return the smile, but it might've come across as a grimace as I fought to make a coherent sentence come out of my mouth.

Luckily, she was already on her way out the door.

The tension gripping my muscles released its hold, and shaky laughter escaped my lips. I briefly closed my eyes as I ripped off a piece of paper towel to dry my hands. That was painless.

“Something funny?”

My eyes flew open faster than an extreme couponer on Black Friday. I turned away, in the direction of the trash.

“Nope, nothing is funny at all in my life currently, at this very moment, what about you?” I said.

Duh, two people were in the shower, and the second person just had to be Tyler Sawyer. I mean, I shouldn't have been surprised, but now I was definitely deleting his list. I shot another glance his way.

He cocked his head, gaze direct.

Mouth unusually dry, I avoided his probing eye contact.

But, I ran into the other issue of staring at the rest of his chiselled body. The droplets of water running down his abs were especially fascinating, seeing as they led my eyes down a path that hit a white towel wrapped around his waist.

I jerked my attention back up to his face, a face that radiated superiority.

“Whatever you say,” he said, pink lips curled into a knowing smirk. He turned to leave, posture perfect with his shoulder back and neck exposed. Well, a whole lot more than his neck exposed.

My lips pressed into a white slash. I threw out the paper towel, wanting to wipe that smirk off Tyler Sawyer’s face.

“Next time put a sock on the door,” I mumbled to his back. Sarcasm might’ve been the lowest form of wit, but made me feel like I had the last word without the actual confrontation.

“Sorry, did you say something?” he said and turned back around.

I yelped, then gave him an incredulous stare.

“What?” I said, choking on my words. I mentally cringed. Maybe my mumble wasn’t as mumble-like as I thought. “Uh, I said that I hope you have a good night.”

“Sure you did, Little Miss Sunshine,” he said, giving a pointed look at my shirt that read, *radiate positivity*, before he left. The door actually shut behind him this time.

I grabbed my toothbrush using unnecessary force, almost snapping the flimsy plastic. My face scowled back at me in the mirror as my mind mulled over the past fifteen minutes. Jerk.

Finally alone, I brushed my teeth and washed my face.

I rushed down the hall back to my room because I didn’t want to run into anyone else on my floor. It was around twelve, so it wasn’t likely I would’ve run into anyone, seeing as the floor parties died down around eleven. People didn’t trickle back to the dorms until two.

I had my schedule down pat, and usually, everything went according to plan.

But, Tyler Sawyer decided to throw a wrench in everything.

I shut the door to my room behind me and put all my things away. Hopping into bed, I snuggled under the mound of blankets, warmth seeping back into my toes.

Only then did I let my head fall back, thankful for my single room.

I'd had my fill of people for the day. I thought orientation week was busy, but this was the longest week of my life. From finding all my classes to the club fair to meeting a million people, my first week of classes had been one hurdle after another. So, even though every other freshman was probably having a wild night out, I was utterly exhausted after this week of trying to get ahead on work.

I curled into myself, chest caving in.

My phone buzzed on the bedside table, the light illuminating the room.

A bolt of irritation hit me.

I reached out to turn the thing off, but when I squinted to read the small text, I was greeted by the name of the sender.

Mia Chabra. My sister.

A heaviness settled in my stomach. *You better be out having fun tonight, girl! But not too much fun, don't do anything I wouldn't do ☺ And, call me soon! I want to hear all about your first week of classes!*

I put the phone down and considered agreeing to call her, then not following through.

Biting a hangnail, I picked the phone back up and typed a quick response. *I'll call you on Sunday if that works for you.*

The whoosh of the iMessage sending echoed in the silent room.

I scrubbed a hand over my face, knowing the call would be like every other time I talked to my sister.

Voices from the hall rung clear in my room through the paper-thin walls. Someone stumbled into the wall outside my room, the thud sounding painful. But, soon enough, there was a smattering of giggles.

I'd also avoided Mia's comments on what my Friday night activities should be, namely not with my good friend, sleep.

I tried to imagine what she would say if I told her about the awkward interaction I just had. She'd probably tell me to stop overthinking everything. As if she understood my Type A personality. Which reminded me, I had to delete Tyler Sawyer's list.

I opened my notes app and scrolled to the first entry. I scanned the old list, made my first night here.

tyler sawyer

pros:

— hotter than sebastian stan combined with ryan reynolds. heck, maybe even hotter than ian somerhalder, if that's even humanly possible

— has a picture holding cute dog on ig

— DIMPLES

cons:

— who actually refers to themselves as their last name? sawyer reminds me of tom sawyer the mouse thing in that disney movie

— arrogant hockey boy

— will prob never actually talk to him

— tbh too many to count i give up

I highlighted the whole thing, deleted it, and promptly fell asleep.

Wrong. Again.

With a twitchy feeling in me, my legs crossed and uncrossed, unable to stay still.

I glanced back at the offending string of questions, and slammed my Calculus textbook shut, shoving it to the corner of my desk.

“Ugh,” I groaned, rubbing my brow to ward off a headache.

I’d spent my whole Sunday working ahead in my hardest subject. I was either stuck, or my brain was rebelling at the amount of information I was attempting to shove into it. Either way, it was probably time to call it quits for the night.

Leaning back in my chair, my gaze drifted out the window.

There was a roaring bonfire in the quad with groups of students huddled around it. It was early

September, but as soon as dusk hit, the temperature here dropped.

A girl, bundled in a blanket, skewered a marshmallow and stuck it in the fire. When it caught aflame, she shrieked and pulled it out. The boy next to her grabbed the stick from her and blew out the fire before she could do any damage waving that flaming marshmallow around. She kissed him on the cheek and ate the marshmallow, peeling back the charred layer as he wrapped his arm around her.

Ribs squeezing tight, I shoved my hands in the pocket of my hoodie.

It was a commonly known fact that marshmallows roast better in the embers of the fire, turning that perfect golden brown with a gooey centre.

Plus, waving a fiery stick around probably wasn't the brightest thing to do. But, in my experience, boys didn't really go for the brightest of girls, so she had that working for her.

My phone rang, shattering the silence of my Sunday evening.

I darted over to my door to pull it closed. I left it open whenever I was in my room, like everyone else

on my floor. That made it easy to chat whenever or find someone to go grab a bite with. But, I didn't want this call broadcasted for everyone to hear.

It rang again, this time vibrating in my hand.

I climbed into bed with my tablet in my other hand but kept shifting, unable to get comfortable.

The shrill noise sounded again.

Plastering on a smile, I picked up the phone. Even though Mia wasn't FaceTiming me, she said she could tell when I wasn't smiling on the phone. It was one of her many talents.

"Hey, Nat! It's Mia," she said.

I hesitated to tell her that, yes, I know, I have caller ID. But, instead, I said, "Hi, Mia, how're you doing?"

"I'm so great right now, Elijah just went out to get some groceries so I thought I'd call and catch up with you. We just got back from his family's cabin, we went on a little getaway for our three-year anniversary," she said.

My eyes narrowed. Mia never really called just for calling's sake. Or to "catch up." But, she did

always give me way more information than I really needed or wanted, so at least that stayed consistent.

“Congrats on three years, that’s great. I’m doing good, busy,” I said and picked at the fraying edge of one of my blankets.

“Busy’s good,” she deadpanned.

“Yeah, yesterday I did some really fascinating reading on—” I started to tell her more, but she cut me off.

“You know, Mom actually has to tell you something, so you should call her,” she said. And with that, her real reason for calling was revealed.

“Why can’t you just tell me what Mom told you to tell me like she always does?” I said.

“Nat, call her, okay? It’s about your business stuff.”

She knew if she said that, I’d call Mom immediately. “Right, then I’ll call her as soon as we finish talking.”

I was ready to pull the phone away from my ear and call Mom. My business was my baby.

As if she could tell I wanted to hang up, she said, “Hey, not so fast! I have questions for you.”

I straightened. Uh oh. Immediately my thoughts went to The Bathroom Incident, as I decided to call it. How could she know about that?

“What did you get up to Friday night? Anything fun? I need to live vicariously through someone,” she said. I slumped into my plush back pillow. Of course, she didn’t know about The Bathroom Incident.

“I actually stayed in on Friday, I was so tired after my first full week of classes. Plus, it was club week, and I signed up for—” I said, but she cut me off again.

“Natasha, you really need to stop being so scared of putting yourself out there, using all your silly pro/con lists. Gosh, you’ve never even had a boyfriend. All you really accomplish is pushing people away—” she went on, but I stopped listening.

My pulse sped up as she preached to me. I cracked my knuckles, fighting the urge to argue with her. Mia droned on about her fantastic university experience and the many friends she made.

Who was she to stomp on my pro/con lists? So I liked to think things through, sue me. They'd served me well this far. But, her little boyfriend dig hit a little too close to home.

Mia continued on, giving anecdotes and going on random side tangents.

There was a thickness in my throat as I half-listened to her try and guide me when she so clearly had no idea about my interests or personality. We clashed in so many ways.

Extrovert, meet introvert.

Emotion, meet logic.

Mia, meet Nat.

"Hello, Nat? Do you understand what I'm telling you?" she said, finishing her latest tangent on how much Elijah has improved her life.

"Oh, yeah. For sure. Thanks for the advice," I lied. Mia meant well.

"Anytime little sis," she said, "I actually was just talking to..." she continued on, telling me about all the details of her life. I picked up my iPad and doodled with my Apple pencil, hand gliding over the smooth screen.

I'd learned long ago that Mia was a great sharer, not so much a listener. It'd never really bugged me, but I'd never really wanted to talk to her before without her quick fixes or advice that just wouldn't work for me.

A sigh rose from deep in me unconsciously.

"Did you say something?" Mia said.

"No," I said, wrapping my arms around my knees. "You were talking about the date you were planning to surprise Elijah on his birthday?" I prompted.

"Right!" she said, her words blurring together as the minutes passed.

The seeds of her words took root in my brain, though, taking hold.

I crossed my arms, frowning.

I did not push people away. She barely knew me. I could have a boyfriend if I wanted one, and I'd prove it to her.

Although, as much as I hated to admit it, sometimes, there was the little voice in my head that said, maybe I was just designed to be alone.

So... I just shared my writing for the first time!□
What did you think? What are your initial thoughts about Nat? Are you going to keep reading? (Okay, I'll stop bombarding you with questions now, but seriously, lemme know).

Enough about the book. I started posting my story here because I want to get to know **you** too. So, tell me about yourself, if you're comfortable!

I'll start. I'm Nikki and I love everything reading-and-writing-related. To date, I've never made pro/con lists about my crushes, but I have sent many a drunk text. I'm all about everything from contemporary to sci-fi to fantasy, but always appreciate a healthy dose of romance in everything. I have tons of knowledge from a lifetime of reading. Some random facts about me are that I'm from Canada and I'm a university student.

Now tell me about you! Where are you from? Are you in school and what are you studying/studied (econ student here!)?

Oh, and how could I forget some shameless self promo... here's my obligatory reminder to please vote for JPS and add it to your reading list. And, if you're feeling so inclined, give me a follow so you can be notified whenever I have important info

about the story to share. Okay, now that's enough of all that, I feel so conceited and awkward asking you to follow me.

But, in all seriousness, I'm **so** excited for you to come along with me on Nat's story. Sit down, grab a cup of tea (or your beverage of choice), and get reading with me, you lovely human.

2 | Room 427

I pulled the door open, handle gripped with both hands. The wind fought me, pushing the door closed, but I slipped into the main student building. I paused in the vestibule to catch my breath.

Outside the tall glass doors, leaves in all hues of red and orange danced in the gusts. A majestic display from the inside, but on the other side, it wreaked havoc with more than my hair. I pulled my eyes away and focused back on my mission through the hordes of students.

The door to the central area opened with ease. The welcome scent of coffee brewing greeted me, albeit tainted by the musty smell of the older building.

My mouth salivated, and I honed in on the source of my lifeblood— Tim Hortons.

I made a beeline for the coffee shop, despite the long line. Nothing could come between this girl and her coffee. After the hellish Calc class I suffered through, I desperately needed my caffeine fix.

Voices overlapped as students swarmed, here for the lunch rush, like me.

Being the only Tims on campus that served their whole menu, more people flocked to it than a Marvel movie on opening night. As a super fan, I would wait an inordinate amount of time, sans costume.

The flutter of papers on the community board when the doors opened, and the breeze gusted in drew my attention. Posters for the upcoming hockey game on Friday were stapled all over.

I edged closer to read the details. Sports had never been a focus at my high school, but maybe things were different here at Summit University.

“Hey, you in line or what?” the tall guy behind me said, and I jolted away from the board.

The line had shifted forward while I stopped.

“Yeah, sorry.” I moved up as the complainer scowled at me, and from there, I made it to the front in no time.

“I’ll take a large double-double and five assorted Timbits,” I said and got the goods in minutes. Efficient and delicious.

While others wasted time stalking tables where the current occupants were possibly packing up, I didn't even bother scanning the filled cafeteria-style seating area.

I went to my empty table, obscured from view by a vending machine.

After tossing my backpack in the seat next to me, I plopped into the chair. I sucked in a breath at the sudden scalding pain at slopping coffee on my wrist.

Lifting the plastic tab of the cup, I inhaled the aromatic scent, face upturned. Bliss. Infused by warmth as the coffee filled my stomach, I sipped the hot drink. I savoured the perfect balance of bitter and sweet for a moment before dragging my phone out of my jacket pocket.

I bit the bullet and swiped into my contacts, then pressed the little green icon. The call rang for the longest thirty seconds of my life before she picked up.

"Hi, honey!" said Mom. "Sorry I missed your call last night, I was out at dinner and by the time I got back I forgot to call you. It was the most romantic night, did you see my post about it?" She sucked in air.

“All good, Mom,” I cut in. If I didn’t, she would ramble worse than Mia. I tried to get ahold of her yesterday after getting off the phone with Mia, but, of course, she had plans on a Sunday night.

“Anywho, I have some exciting news, baby.” She paused for dramatic effect. Instead of her voice, I heard the thump of unfinished coffees being thrown into the trash. How riveting.

“I’m moving to New York City with Christopher!”

“That’s great, Mom,” I trailed off. “Who’s Christopher?” I said, then plucked a chocolate Timbit from the bag, taking a bite of the sweet treat. My self-awarded reward for calling her.

“My fiancé, silly!”

“Oh, okay.” I took another bite. “You never told me about him,” I mumbled, crumbs escaping my lips. I stopped keeping track of her relationships long ago.

“What? I’m pretty sure I told you, Nat. I met him on my singles cruise, then I told you before you left for school,” she said.

“No, we haven’t talked since before the cruise. I thought you were dating Byron, but congratulations. Hope it all works out.” I scratched at my chipped polish, my gaze wandering to the giant glass windows with a view of students passing by. Who else had to deal with a mother that couldn’t remember when last they’d seen their child?

“Aw, thanks, honey. We’re planning on eloping in Vegas,” she said. The whole point of eloping was not telling anyone, or planning it, no? But, I didn’t bother to figure out her thought process.

“Mhm, have fun.” What other reaction did she expect of me?

“So, back to moving to New York,” she said.

“Right. You should still be able to work remotely, I don’t see any issue with that.” Before I left for university, I set everything up so that I would be as hands-off as possible with a virtual team. Mom handled customer service, A.K.A, the bane of my existence.

The business worked like a well-oiled machine, and we managed to sell more than ever.

“Well, what I was calling to tell you, was that I won’t be working anymore. You know, it’s a new

relationship with Chris, and I want to dedicate all my time to it.” Before my brain could catch up with the grenade she dropped, she continued, “I knew you’d understand, baby. Talk soon, kisses!”

The dial tone buzzed in my ears, mocking me.

A sudden coldness hit my core as she left me spluttering.

I curled my hand into a fist, nails biting the palm.

Did she just quit?

This couldn’t have happened at a worse time. Where would I find the time to train someone for customer service? It took me over a year to let my own mother take over for Pete’s sake. Then, she decided to leave me hanging.

I grabbed another Timbit, one of the powdered ones, and squished it so hard that the jelly in the centre squeezed out. The powder poofed everywhere.

“Son of a motherless goat!” I cursed under my breath.

The bright pink jelly dripped down the white collar of my blouse onto the grey knit sweater

layered over it. Powder settled on my jeans, specks of white splattered on the denim.

Teeth clenched, I grabbed at a napkin.

Now, I had more than one mess to clean up. I never should've relied on Mom. Conceivably, my assistant, Carly, could've handled customer service. Still, I interacted with my customers in a specific way that I had to train someone to do, hands-on.

Thanks to good old Mom, now I had to take on the customers myself, on top of everything else.

I shook my head, dabbing at the mess on my clothes.

This sure was shaping up to be one hell of a day.

Hell day turned into hell week.

My gaze darted to the room numbers as I passed them. 407, 409, 411...

I couldn't be late for the first newspaper meeting. Me, Natasha Chabra, the organized, Google-Calendar-following, colour-coding-notes Natasha Chabra never arrived late.

I allocated fifteen minutes to find the room since I already checked beforehand anyways on the university app that had directions to every place on campus.

So, I might've spent ten extra minutes responding to a customer complaint, leaving me a mere five minutes.

413, 415, 417...

That five minutes turned into ten when I took a wrong turn.

419, 421, 423...

I checked my phone. Wednesday, September 10th, 5:14. Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ!

The numbers ticked on. 5:15.

Now, I was officially fifteen minutes late.

425...

I rounded the corner.

430?

I scratched my temple. Where in the world was Room 427?

Then, at the end of the hall, I struck gold. Room 427. Whoever numbered these rooms should've been fired.

I screeched to a halt outside the door to slow my racing heart, then gripped the cold metal of the handle.

The door squeaked as I opened it, revealing a room full of people. No heads swivelled in my direction as I expected, but Professor Davis hesitated mid-sentence.

He gave me a harsh squint, but hopefully, I was reading too much into it. A speck of dust could've landed in his eye. Or, perhaps, he despised my guts for disrespecting his time.

I never could tell what he thought in class about the books we analyzed, so I didn't know why I would be able to discern his reaction walking in late to his meeting.

He adjusted his tie. "As I was saying, congratulations on making the Summit Post."

With hot cheeks, I stumbled to the nearest empty chair, in Siberia—the farthest seat at the back of the room. Enter the Natasha Chabra walk of shame.

“We were very selective in choosing our writers this year, and I know you won’t disappoint. You all show tremendous promise, and I eagerly anticipate reading your work.” I sat at the long table, gaze downward.

Professor Davis’s lit class was one of the few lectures I actually liked, so it stung that I made a poor impression of myself by getting here so late.

My hair fell forward, hiding my flushed face.

The girl sitting beside me nudged me with her shoulder, box braids swinging. “Don’t worry, we literally just started. Davis couldn’t get the projector to work, but what else is new,” she whispered with a light chuckle.

I glanced up at him, but he went on about the importance of journalistic integrity. He usually struggled with technology in class, grumbling about back when he began teaching there was no such thing as a PowerPoint.

Giving her a small smile, I nodded. I vaguely recognized her from the lecture, though I’d probably

only ever seen the back of her head.

I leaned back in the plush chair, soaking in the professor's thoughts. He spoke at the front of the room, pointing to a slideshow jam-packed with words.

We all had a place around one long table. Single desks lined the walls. Behind a glass board with some half-erased plans were floor-to-ceiling windows with a view of the sprawling campus.

"I'm the paper's teacher advisor, so I won't be doing much hands-on with you all. That'll mainly be left to your very capable editor," Professor Davis said, gesturing at someone sitting near him to go up.

The girl next to me gave me the meeting materials that were going around. I took a packet and passed the rest on. My fingers slid over the smooth sheets of paper as I sorted through the pile.

While I read, the whir of a fan inside the projector increased over the steady drone of air conditioning until the whirring paused, stuttered, and gave out, along with the overhead lights.

"Well, I guess I'm bad luck," the editor said as he joined the Prof at the head of the table, seeing as the

electricity cut out in time with his arrival. A smattering of laughter rose from the group.

I pursed my lips. Why did that voice sound so familiar?

“Power should be back up in two shakes of a lamb’s tail. This sometimes happens when the wind knocks over a power line or something of the sort,” Professor Davis said as people turned on their phones to illuminate the room.

The acrid scent of burned coffee wafted over from the table behind me. A little condiment trolley carrying sugar packets, fake sweeteners, and creams fit nicely beside it. I couldn’t help but notice the selection of snacks, some more appealing than others. The croissants had a plastic-y look, whereas the oversized muffins loaded with berries made my mouth water.

People broke off into small groups, speaking in low voices. I turned to the girl who’d reassured me earlier.

I stuck my hand out. “Hi, I’m Nat.”

She gripped my hand. “I’m Layla.”

“So, what are you excited to write about?” I angled towards her in my chair.

“I’m a photographer for the paper, words aren’t my thing. But, I take it you’re a writer?” She tilted her head, and I nodded.

“In that case, are you interested in any specific type of photography?” I asked, voice rising in pitch. Did photographers like taking different types of photos? What were the different types of photos? I knew more about astrophysics, and that was only because once I went down a YouTube rabbit hole about Neil Degrasse Tyson.

“I’m all about action photography,” she said, eyes bright. “On Friday, I’m—” She halted as light flooded the room. Lo and behold, the power kicked back on in minutes.

She shut her mouth as attention returned to Professor Davis and the editor.

“Let’s finish this conversation after,” I murmured. Layla nodded.

I turned back to the front and landed on a pair of familiar brown eyes. A tentative smile built on my lips. Pablo never told me he was the editor of the paper!

We'd met planting trees on Charity Day, one of the last days of orientation week. We spent all day together under the hot sun chatting.

"Well, good afternoon, everyone. Let's get right back into it, I guess. My name's Pablo Ramirez, and I've been given the amazing opportunity to be Summit Post's editor this year. I'm excited to lead our team and make the Post better than ever," he said.

He continued on, but his words slipped right past me as I remembered the many, many pros on his list. Definitely boyfriend material.

When I didn't know anyone else at Charity Day, Pablo popped up next to me, conversation easy. Being a junior, he was a leader in charge of running the day. Nevertheless, he truly went above and beyond to make sure everyone was comfortable and having fun. Well, as much fun as you could've had planting trees.

As I openly stared, I was reminded that not only his personality made it on the pros list. With a slim and muscular build, his lips always curled into an easy grin. People were just drawn to him. I mean, I could see it in the way that they hung on his every word and returned a smile.

Oh, and don't get me started on his dark eyes. They made me weak at the knees.

I nodded along to whatever he told us, stroking my arm.

Professor Davis stood when Pablo came to a natural pause. He clapped Pablo on the shoulder before he turned to us and said, "Thanks, Mr. Ramirez, but I need to get going."

"I have one last point I forgot to bring up earlier. Twice a year—this semester in December, then again at the end of the year—there's an edition dedicated to personal pieces from the writers."

I smoothed down my skirt and bit down on a smile. Writing for my high school's paper was one of the few extracurriculars I participated in, seeing as my business ate up so much of my time. I could write a stellar personal piece, no problem.

"Everyone is required to submit an article, but only a few will be chosen for publication. Start pondering, let it percolate. The deadline will come up faster than you think, and I want you to dig deep," Professor Davis said.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. Every teacher and their mother toted the same line. Yes, deadlines

were objects in the passenger-side mirror— closer than they appear.

But, I had precisely a bazillion other items on my to-do list to tick off before even thinking about this personal piece.

“And with that, I bid you adieu,” he finished.

As soon as the door shut behind him, the decibel levels in the room rose considerably. I followed suit and sniffed out the coffee like a bloodhound.

The sludge I poured in a paper cup was a far cry from the aromatic coffee blends I kept stocked in my room, but it was somewhat warm and caffeinated.

I brought a shaky hand to my forehead and massaged my temple, closing my eyes for a second. I barely believed it had been only two days since Mom dropped a truckload of crap on my head with the amount of work that’d piled up.

“Alright, everyone, if I could have your attention please,” Pablo said.

I slid back into my seat next to Layla.

“We’re just going to jump right into this and hand out the first set of assignments for the September issue.” He raised a stack of papers in the air to

emphasize his point as we all settled, chairs scraping.

He began to list the options and writers volunteered.

“Upcoming Summit University Student Council vote.” Political-ish stuff. Bleh. Plus, interviewing all the candidates would take for-freaking-ever.

I rubbed the back of my neck. I needed something quick and easy.

“Covering the climate change protest.” Too significant for me to mess up.

“The new cannabis shop opening.” Perfect!

I raised my hand, but a guy closer to Pablo snagged it.

He went on, each option growing less appealing. Beneath the desk, my knee bounced.

“The future of the internet opinion piece.” Did I have forty hours to spend researching?

My stomach rolled. I grabbed a water bottle from the middle of the table, cold condensation on my warm skin.

“Student-athlete interview.”

“Me!” I blurted out as my hand shot up. Heads turned in my direction.

“Uh, for the student-athlete interview. Me, um, I would love to write it,” I said in a weak voice. What I wouldn’t have given to, at that moment, slide off my chair and crawl out the door.

“Are you sure? Most of your work has been investigative, from what I understand,” Pablo said, head bent as he checked his list.

Yes, well, I didn’t have time to do a deep dive into the dark underbelly of the Summit University Student Council, so this interview would have to do.

Instead of voicing the snarky demon in my head, I replied, “I want to expand my skill set. Broaden my horizons.” A little white lie never hurt anyone. I needed a quick and painless article that would be done faster than I could cross it off my to-do list.

“There is one issue we’ve been running into, though.” He chewed his bottom lip, regarding me.

“What’s that? I can make it work, no problem.” I shrugged. So, there might be a little snag in my easy peasy article, but how hard could this really be?

“Well, the player has declined all our interview requests so far, and we need to get it in this issue.”

“Who is it? I’m sure I can convince them,” I said.

“Let me check here.” Pablo ducked his head, consulting his notes.

“It’s the hockey team’s new star rookie, Tyler Sawyer.”

“Wait, who?” I said, voice halting.

“Tyler Sawyer.”

Of course, it had to be him.

Now, we’ve met a bunch of new characters! What do you think of them— Nat’s mom, Professor Davis, Layla, Pablo? I’m having so much fun meeting all of them with you.

Are you a coffee addict like Nat? I’m partial to a chai tea latte myself. What’s your go-to drink order? Nat’s is clearly a double-double from Tims.

Also, exciting news! I’ve hopped onto a bunch of different socials if you wanna hang with me over there too. I post sneak peeks of upcoming chapters, exclusive content, and of course, fangirl over everything bookish. I’m @NikkiPierceBooks on

Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (minus the s cause of silly character limits). Are there any other platforms you're on that I should join? Lemme know!

If you've read this far and haven't **voted** yet, what're you doing? *picture me side-eyeing you* Just kidding! Or am I...

I'm having SO much fun writing Nat's story. Until next time!

3 | Fountain Pens

Nope.

My stomach churned, and not in the I-ate-a-bad-burrito-way, but in an ohmysweetgoodness-I-can't-do-this-way.

This was not happening. I totally didn't agree to do this when my shocked brain went into autopilot, must-be-polite mode.

I bounced a curled knuckle against my mouth as I glared at the Summit University dry erase calendar tacked up above my desk. A big, fat red X stared back, mocking me.

No way, José.

Not a single universe existed where I, Natasha Chabra, would take my butt out of this chair and go ask Tyler Sawyer to do the interview.

I swallowed, throat dry. After I procrastinated all day, I had to rip off the Band-aid and just do it.

A pro/con list wasn't even necessary, this was a no-brainer.

I made a commitment to the paper to get this article done, and in order to get the article done, I had to interview him.

But first, I had to convince him to do the interview.

I had to convince him, the star hockey player who Pablo couldn't persuade.

I had to convince him, the guy who made up one half of The Bathroom Incident™.

I had to convince him, the person who lived two doors down from me that I barely talked to for the three whole weeks we'd been living in the dorms, despite running into him everywhere.

And, to squirt a dollop of Cheese Whiz on top of these stale nachos, I told Pablo I would send him the first draft by the weekend.

So, here I was, sitting at my desk on Thursday night, the deadline in two days.

With restless legs, I pushed my chair back and went straight for my closed door. I grabbed the handle, then drew back.

I blew out a series of short breaths to gain control of my spiralling thoughts.

Just do it, Nat, I played on a repeating loop in my head. Soon, Nike would be calling me for copyright infringement.

In one decisive motion, my sweaty hand wrapped around the metal handle. Before I knew it, I stood in their empty doorway, the door already open, like usual.

I poked my head in, eyes travelling from the patterned carpet with muted stains to the dings and scuff marks on the walls. On one side of the room, clothes were thrown in a clump bed and lying on the floor. The other side had a made bed with extra blankets and pillows folded on a shelf.

Across the windowsill sat an impressive collection of empty tequila bottles for only three weeks of being here.

But, there was one key thing missing. Or rather, one key person.

“Hello?” I called out.

A thud sounded, then a muted string of curses.

Pausing to examine the scene in front of me again, my gaze swept the room. I edged closer to the source of the thud and squatted.

My head tilted to the side, and I pursed my lips. “What’re you doing under the desk?”

The last thing I expected to find was Will, Tyler Sawyer’s roommate, crouched in the small space, rubbing the back of his head.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Oh,” I said, straightening. “I’m Nat from down the hall.”

“Right,” he trailed off, giving me a sidelong glance as his tall frame unfolded.

A flush crept across my cheeks. “I was looking for Tyler?”

“He’ll be back in a sec, you can just chill here till he gets back.”

I bobbed my head. We stared at each other.

“So, I—” “You can—” we both started. I shut my mouth.

“Go ahead,” I laughed. The edges of Will’s lips turned up.

“You can sit while you wait for Sawyer.” He motioned to the messy bed.

I perched on the edge of the bed. This was presumably Will’s side of the room, so Tyler Sawyer had the organized side.

It was nothing surprising—a nightstand with a bedside lamp, a desk with stationery and pens. He had a few pictures up and a Summit University pennant.

“Want something to drink?” Will went to the mini-fridge in front of the window.

“I’m good, thanks.” I shifted to get comfortable on the lumpy mattress topper.

The suction of the fridge door giving into pressure as it opened echoed in the quiet room. Bottles clinked on the door. Will pulled out a reusable bottle filled with water and took a long sip.

“I was, uh, looking for my ring.” He jerked his chin towards the desk.

“Oh, okay. Want help finding it?” I wanted anything to get my mind off asking about the

interview.

“Nah, it’s all good. I know it’s around here somewhere, I—” Will stopped when I started looking anyways.

“Or why not, go for it,” he finished.

First, I checked his desk, but it wasn’t under the scattered pile of papers. Ignoring the itch to organize all the loose syllabuses, I got on my knees and scanned beneath the bed.

I took out my phone and turned on the flashlight. Gold metal glinted in the light.

Found it!

I grabbed the ring and passed it over to him. It had some sort of engraving on it, an emblem.

“Huh. I swear I checked there.” He pocketed the ring.

“You’re not wearing it?” I asked.

“Oh, no, I’m giving it to the girl I want to fu—” He cleared his throat. “Hook up with.”

“What do you mean?” That made no sense, and I considered myself quite smart.

“This is my class ring. There’s this whole thing around giving it to your girlfriend or whatever.” He set down his water and sat in his desk chair.

“Your high school class ring?” My brows squished together.

“Yeah. Some people take it pretty seriously, I couldn’t care less.” He shrugged, opening his laptop. “But, the girl I wanna hook up with cares, and I now have it to give to her. So thanks,” he said, eyes scanning his screen.

I nodded like I understood what the point of his ring thing was. “No problem.” Weird, but okay.

“Do you know when Tyl—” I started.

“Talking about me?” a deep voice said behind me.

I whirled around, pulling my phone tight against my chest. My breath hitched as I took in the familiar sight.

Dripping hair. Abs. The same white towel that led me down to— I forced my eyes away.

You know, until that very moment, I’d never found a thermostat more interesting. I stared at it on

the wall behind his head and shivered from the light breeze from the window.

I cleared my throat noisily. “So, Tyler—” I said, but he cut in.

“Sawyer.”

“What?” I frowned.

“It’s Sawyer.” He leaned against the door frame.

“Right, ah, sorry, Sawyer,” I said, emphasizing his name.

“How was your shower?” I blurted out. “I mean, I heard they were having issues with the water pressure, and that’s a very important thing. Water pressure can make or break a shower, believe me. I’m sure you know, having taken showers yourself, as a person. I hope you’ve taken showers. But who am I to judge? You don’t have—”

Ty raised a single, dark brow. I paused. Had his eyes always been that blue? ‘Cause damn, those baby blues could rival the walls of my room when I went through that neon phase in middle school.

“Sunshine, get to your point,” he said, eyes on mine. I bit the inside of my cheek to fight a scowl. Who was he calling Sunshine?

“Well, you see.” I gestured with my hands, stalling. I took a deep breath and staring at those piercing eyes, everything tumbled out.

“So, really, this all started with my Mom who quit her job working for me to move to New York City with her fiancé who I’ve never met, which dumped a buttload of work into my lap so then I needed an article that would be quick, and there was a student-athlete interview, and my options were dwindling and long story short, I need to interview you for the Summit Post preferably sooner rather than later because my deadline is this weekend and I kind of put off asking you, which I’m sorry about, but I promise I’ll take up the littlest, teeniest amount of your time,” I said in one breath.

“So, you’re telling me that writing an article about me was your last resort, and you actually have no interest in this at all?” he said.

“Yes!” I nodded.

His face was unreadable.

“Wait, no.” I froze as my brain caught up. “That came out wrong.” I cringed.

Will leaned back in his chair and stuck his head out. “You’re shit outta luck, Nat. Sawyer here

doesn't do inte—"

"I'll do it, meet me after the game tomorrow," he said, shooting Will a look.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you!" I beamed.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to get changed, unless you'd like to stay? I won't object," he said with a hard smile. He moved closer, invading my personal space.

"Nope, I'm leaving. Thanks!" I backed away.

"Bye, Will!" I looked over Tyler Sawyer's shoulder pointedly, then darted back to my room.

Slamming the door to my room shut behind me, I swallowed a shout of glee, fit pumping the air. Success!

I rested my head against the door.

But, as my racing heart slowed, I slid down the door till my butt hit the floor.

I just made a total fool of myself for fifteen minutes straight, and now I had the interview itself to do. With Tyler Sawyer.

Great.

Was Tyler Sawyer in Witness Protection? A CIA agent? An X-Files alien dropped on earth?

Finding information about him online was a major struggle.

I considered myself quite the stalking sleuth, but other than an Instagram he rarely posted on, I couldn't find any other social media. And, as for other recent articles, nada.

Was it even possible to have such a small digital footprint in the 21st century?

I leaned forward in my chair and uncrossed my legs, ignoring the squeak and dab of a marker against the whiteboard at the front of the class. My tutorial could wait.

Pushing back my sleeves, I squinted at the screen and clicked on a new little blue link.

Aha!

An article in his high school's archives from Grade 10 about the up and coming hockey star, Tyler

Sawyer. Even at sixteen, he was a “young phenom.”

I switched tabs to the Google Doc titled, “He Who Must Not Be Named’s Interrogation Questioning.”

The whirl of the fan inside my laptop and chairs creaking faded away as my fingers flew across smooth keys.

Thank God this was a personal interview, and I didn’t need to know anything hockey related. I threw in a couple of questions about his thoughts on the mass media portrayals of hockey and his attitudes on safety, but otherwise, focused on the influence of teammates, parents, coaches, and his journey.

I paused, rolling my neck to loosen a kink. I looked around the class, then froze.

A bout of dizziness hit me as I looked around the *empty* class. I gave the clock on the wall an incredulous stare.

Fudge berries! Lit class!

I hightailed my ass out of there, not bothering to put my laptop in my bag.

With berating thoughts bouncing around my skull, I rushed over to the English building. I pushed open the heavy door to the class, breath coming in short bursts.

Lit class was held in a medium-size lecture, one where every row had tables, none of those annoying lap desks. And, of course, there were no easy seats to get to.

With a forced smile, I shimmied past half a row of people, mumbling sorry's. Oops, stepped on someone's bag. And another one. A guy let out a grunt. Well, it might have been a foot that time. I winced.

I slumped into the empty chair and dropped my laptop on the desk. Cracking it open, I tried to catch up with Professor Davis.

"We're continuing our discussion of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. If you recall from last class, we discussed that gothic horror seeks to produce a sense of terror," he said.

The clacking of computer keys filled the room, my own fingers adding to the hum.

"The gothic has two important attributes— it's the world of excess and signifies an over-abundance

of imaginative frenzy. It's untamed by reason and..." the prof continued on.

Wait. I paused. This was lit class. I smoothed down my windblown ponytail. Lit class meant Alec.

I scanned the backs of the sea of heads, holding still.

"*Frankenstein* is a tale of hubris. Shelley explores the powers of scientific exploration— dangers of flying too close to the sun," Professor Davis said.

Found him! My heartbeat quickened, eyes bright and glossy.

Alec sat near the front with distinct tousled dark hair, chin resting on his hand as he listened intently, nodding along with the professor.

Davis went on. Yadda, yadda, Icarus, trapped cause of the maze thing King Minos made for the bull he caught his wife cheating on him with, et cetera.

I met Alec in the first lit class. We both arrived early, and he sat next to me. We briefly introduced ourselves before class started. While he'd carried on the conversation, I stared at his deep brown eyes with amber flecks. He mesmerized me with his

expressive gestures, asking me little questions that I could barely force my brain to function and answer.

As a poli sci student, an English course was mandatory for him, but he heard great things about Professor Davis. Most people took this course because of him, from a bunch of different faculties.

“Mary Wollenscraft Shelley lived in the shadow of” killing “her mother in birth and her father always reminded her of this. She grew up with this sense that life and death are deeply connected to one another,” he said, segueing into Mary Shelley’s life.

I rested my chin in my palm, abandoning my notetaking.

Blinking slowly, my expression went soft. Alec would rock Mr. Darcy’s profession-of-love-scene in the rain. I totally didn’t envision the scene in my head with Alec instead of Matthew Macfadyen.

I snuck another glance. His long fingers held a pen loosely, a moleskin notebook laid out in front of him.

Reaching into my bag, I pulled out my phone and swiped into the notes app. I added to his growing pros list. *Knows his way around a fountain pen.*

My stomach roiled, and I sighed, putting my phone away.

This was as close as I would ever get to being Keira Knightley. Or Elizabeth Bennett. Same thing.

I rubbed my forearms. Why couldn't I dig up the courage to go talk to him?

Professor Davis moved from behind the podium, drawing my attention. "Young Shelley spent her days reading her mother's books. She was a little weird though— Shelley and her first boyfriend hooked up for the first time at her mother's grave." Odd to hear my sixty-year-old professor talk about hooking up, but okay.

The girl in front of me turned and whispered something. Her friend held a hand over her mouth to suppress a smile, but a giggle slipped through.

The skin under my eyes tightening, I sucked in a breath through clenched teeth and focused back on my notes.

"Shelley, her husband, and a poet, Byron, all spent summer inside and in 1816 the trend was ghost stories. One night Mary overheard Byron and Shelley talking to each other; they were talking

about some recent scientific discoveries from Luigi Galvani.”

My gaze drifted back to the whispering girls. I rubbed my chest, shoulders hunched. Past them, I spotted Layla. I remembered correctly at the newspaper meeting, she chose this class too.

“Mary Shelley had a dream that a scientist had a dream, and the seed for *Frankenstein* was planted,” he said. Huh. Kinda like how Stephanie Meyer had the *Twilight* dream. Or, I guess Mary had the dream first, so the other way around.

“Can anyone tell me a major theme in *Frankenstein*?” he asked.

A couple of hands rose, one of them being Alec’s. Professor Davis waved in Alec’s direction.

“*Frankenstein* is a framed narrative, so it’s a story within a story, within a story type thing,” Alec said. I gave him my rapt attention, the pulse in my throat rising.

“Yes, you’re correct, Mr. Ito-Russell.” As a frequent contributor, Davis called on Alec by name.

“The creature is at the centre of the narrative, filtered by Victor Frankenstein’s perspective, filtered

again by Robert Walton, and then finally told by the author. The author is whoever receives letters from Robert Walton, which happens to be his sister, Margaret Walton Saville.” Professor Davis paused, giving the room a sweeping look.

“So, what is the importance of the frame narrative?”

If I were a cartoon character, my mouth would have fallen open at that moment. The revelation unfurled in front of my eyes.

Margaret Walton Saville = M.W.S. = Mary Wollenscraft Shelley

The frame narrative was all about how Mary had to sit and listen to Byron and Shelley talk and talk and talk. Women sat on the sidelines.

But, in *Frankenstein*, M.W.S. had a crucial role as the author and was simultaneously forced into the background. Whoa.

Nobody raised a hand. I glanced around uneasily but took care not to meet the professor’s eyes. My tongue darted out, wetting my lip.

Raise your hand.

Just do it.

But, maybe I was all wrong. Maybe that was waaay off. It would be so awkward if I answered and was completely off base.

My hand stayed limp in my lap.

After a tense minute, Alec raised his hand, hesitating.

Professor Davis nodded for him to speak. It was probably for the best that I didn't open my mouth. I would ramble and make a fool out of myself, and I did enough of that yesterday.

“Well, the novel is all about perspective.” Alec waved his pen. “It's about stories and the importance of stories. And, since there's always three degrees of removal, we're not observing the story as it happened, we're observing perception.”

Wow, so insightful. I leaned forward.

“You're absolutely right, and as much as I want to continue this conversation, that's all the time we have for today. See you all next week,” Professor Davis said.

Alec packed up, making small talk with the guy next to him.

I slid my laptop into my bag, but couldn't help but send one last glance his way.

His eyes searched around the crowd. Mine stayed locked on him.

Then, he landed on me and gave a grin. How many books had I read where a girl's heart stopped when a guy looked at her? Now, that line made a whole lot of sense.

Alec walked in my direction, holding my gaze. My cheeks flushed hot.

I couldn't find my voice.

Ohmysweetgoodness.

He was coming over.

Whew! This was a fun chapter to write... all those hot guys☺ More new characters! What do you think of Will and Alec? What're your thoughts about the story so far?

I'd also love to know what you're writing! Feel free to self-promo in the comments☺ Mention the genre and a quick blurb about it so we can all find some new reads. If you don't write, what else are

you currently reading? Or do you have any recommendations?

Also, I dedicated this chapter to Alex (@nonfictionalex) who has helped me SO much in understanding the writing side of being on Wattpad after only being a reader for so long.

Aaaand here's my lil reminder to **vote!** Please & thank you :)

4 | For Puck's Sake

My ass was officially frozen to this seat.

With a heaviness in my body, I imagined myself looking up with my hands raised in the *why me?* position.

The whack of a hockey stick slapping ice drew my attention back to the oblong rink. A puck hit the boards, smack loud above the music playing over the stereo system.

I followed the progress of the game with a stony expression.

Why did I have to be such an idiot? From the way I bolted out of lit class, I could've given Wile E Coyote a run for his money.

The greasy scent of hot dogs cooking at the concession stand wafted over, but I ate back at the dorms. I wrapped my arms around myself, pulling my jacket tighter.

I didn't even give Alec the chance to get within five feet of me before I ran out the door. Who knows if he was coming over to talk to me? I was sitting in the general vicinity of the exit, so he probably just looked at me to be polite.

Plus, I had to leave to get ready for the hockey game. The game that I had two hours to get ready for, but that was still a reason why I had to leave.

Coaches shouting to their players overlapped with the voices of students laughing and talking. The stands around me were packed with fellow crimson-clad students. The group of guys next to me wore team jerseys and baseball caps while carrying plastic cups of beer.

Red wasn't really my colour of choice, so I had slim pickings in my closet. But, buried behind the swimsuit that I never used, I found the red shirt from my welcome package at the beginning of the year.

With a strategic knot tied at the front, it paired well with my pair of high-rise black jeans and a leather jacket. However, I didn't realize that the other team's colour was black, so I kinda stood out in the Summit student section. Oops.

I tracked the fast-moving blades of players racing around the rink, eyes drawn to the one with “SAWYER” lettered across his back. I couldn’t fathom trying to balance on thin blades, let alone moving as gracefully as he did on the ice.

But, of course, he was the reason I had to be here at this godforsaken hockey game, sitting among this tiered seating littered with popcorn.

I glared at the thirteen on Tyler Sawyer’s back. Weren’t hockey players supposed to be superstitious? I rolled a crick in my neck and lost him in the shuffle.

The puck thumped into the other team’s goalie’s glove, giving rise to groans around me. It was the third quarter, or period, or whatever it’s called, and we were tied up.

Even though the goalie grabbing the puck was about as important to me as the crushed peanut shells on the ground, I groaned too. Solidarity, sister. Or conformity, sister, but that didn’t have the same ring to it.

The buzzer rang out, and the players left the rink, leaving two empty hockey nets and markings within the ice. The chatter increased.

A t-shirt gun catapulted shirts into the crowd. I traced the catapult to the front of the section, where a student started up a cheer in the stands.

“Hey, hey, it’s time to fight!” she called out. I squinted and leaned forward in my chair, shoes sticking to the floor. Layla!

She wore a cropped red jersey with blue jeans. A camera swung around her neck as she cheered. The ends of her box braids were red, matching the face paint smeared across her cheeks.

“Everybody yell red and white!” she said, voice clear and louder than I thought possible of her delicate frame.

“Red and white!” the crowd repeated. There was a certain level of drunk I needed to be to do that, and I had no plans to drink tonight. I had to stay sharp to interview Tyler Sawyer.

They went on, somehow devolving into a jumping mass that yelled, “Go, fight, win!” over and over.

Swallowed in the crowd with her group of friends, I lost sight of Layla. I pulled back and rubbed my hands down the front of my pants.

The Zamboni cruised around the rink and left a slick trail of smooth ice in its wake. The surrounding seats had emptied out as people went to the washroom or concessions. So, instead of having to partake in that awkward, forced camaraderie between strangers that cropped up at sporting events, I pulled my phone out.

An email with the subject line “URGENT:” caught my attention.

Sitting on the edge of my chair, I delved into the long email. With a gleam in my eye, I typed out a response. A supply chain issue I could deal with, no problem.

Halfway through the email, my phone dinged. New post from @alecitorussell. My mouth went dry. I may or may not have turned on his post notifications.

Someone tripping returning to their seat in the narrow aisles. He jabbed me with his elbow and splashed beer.

Tapping on the little banner, I opened Instagram.

Blades sliced across the fresh ice, then scraped to a stop. In my periphery, the puck dropped.

What in the world was I going to do the next time I saw Alec? I waited two weeks for him to notice me again, and I missed my freaking chance.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and stared down at the gross concrete floor. Spilled beer, crumpled up candy bags, and discarded frilly paper hot dog holders. How lovely. I guess that was why my shoes were sticky.

I could waltz up to Alec next lit class and go for it, be wild and crazy and ask him to go to coffee. Or for his notes. That was more reasonable. But, I didn't want to be permanently friend-zoned by becoming the study-buddy-who-wants-your-notes-friend. Coffee was friend-like too. What are you supposed to ask to do?

Who was I kidding? Asking him to do anything would involve me actually going up to him to talk to him.

Following him on Instagram, on the other hand, was easy. We vaguely knew each other and had a couple of mutuals. I followed all the boys I made pro/con lists for— Summit wasn't that huge of a school, so it wasn't weird. Or at least, I hoped it wasn't weird.

Oh god, what if they all think I'm the weird stalker girl that followed them on Instagram? I sunk back into the chair.

People burst up from their seats, all together, on cue like I imagined people did when the LAUGH light went off on talk shows. According to the scoreboard, Summit scored. It was 4-3 with six minutes left.

From the bodies tackling number thirteen, I took it that Ty scored. Cheers echoed, and cameras flashed.

I glanced behind me. Bad move. Half naked men with numbers painted on their chest jumped up and down, pennants and flags flying high.

With a pain in my jaw, I gave them a flat side-eye before poking my nose back into my phone.

Alec sat with a group of friends in a coffee shop, arms slung around their shoulders. The caption read, "Othello? More like oh hell no."

I gently bit my bottom lip, fighting a smile.

I scrolled through the rest of his feed, taking care not to accidentally like anything. That would be an awkward conversation.

It played out in my head. So, Nat, why did you like a photo from my vacation in Florida four years ago? Well, that's a great question, Alec. I'm a creepy stalker!

A sour taste filled my mouth as my eyes scanned the pictures.

How could I ever compare to his prom date? Or the other random girl who was on that Florida vacation? I tapped the image once, revealing her tag. Her last name was Ito. Cousin, perhaps. But still, my double chins could never photograph that well.

I tipped my head back, looking skyward. Those fans looked weird. Why did they spin so slowly? Was a badminton birdie stuck up there?

I blinked. I could never ask Alec out. I would never make the first move.

My future flashed before my eyes— the great aunt on Facebook posting nightly life updates.

I ran out of soaps on the DVR.

My dearest Fluffy coughed up a hairball.

#80YearOldVirgin #LiveLoveLaugh ✌

The final buzzer sounded, the finality of it ringing in my ears.

Tyler Sawyer's crisp white dress shirt came in a close second to the usual white towel. Adding a suit on top of that body should've been illegal. Now that I knew hot hockey players wore suits after games, I would figure out what channel showed NHL games.

After listening to the hum of the Zamboni moving across the ice for an inordinate amount of time, I finally made my way down to the locker room exit to find my interviewee.

Area swarming with people, I leaned against a concrete wall to wait. And I'd been here for half an hour. Waiting.

Surrounded by teammates and dare I say, fans, Tyler Sawyer talked to the never-ending stream of people. Monosyllabic, but patient, unlike me. There were so many items I could be checking off my to-do list right now.

I spotted Layla here too somewhere, flitting around the crowd.

My heart palpitations had devolved into a tapping foot by the twenty-minute mark. I checked and rechecked my phone for messages.

Crossing my arms, I fiddled with the leather cuff of my jacket. Most of the fans left, leaving just the guys and their friends. As much as I enjoyed the ozone-like cement scent, a girl could only take so much.

“Let’s just get this over with,” I complained under my breath and squared my shoulders.

I walked over to the group of tall guys and tapped Tyler on the shoulder. That was one broad shoulder.

“Well, you’re a dick!” a girl said to him before walking off in the other direction. He turned to me. Guess I caught the tail-end of an awkward conversation.

“I’m guessing you didn’t decide to change your name to Richard?” I gave a wry smile.

“Nope.” He adjusted his baseball cap. Only he could pull off wearing a backwards cap with a suit and make it look not completely weird.

“Right,” I said, strongly aware of my own heartbeat, “So are you ready for the interview?”

There's a couple places upstairs still open, or—"

"We're going to a bar, let's do the interview there." He picked up his bag and slung it over his shoulder.

My head jerked back. We? A bar?

"What? Where? Why?" I rushed out. "No."

"Yes," he said.

"A bar is not conducive for conducting a formal interview like this." I thought back to one I went to during orientation week with strobe lights and screaming into each other's ears to be heard. Fun when drunk, but not for an interview.

My gaze flicked upward to his eyes. Why did he always have to make such piercing eye contact?

When he didn't say anything, I continued on, "Plus, I don't even have a fake." That was a lie, Mia gave me her old health card and driver's license, but he didn't know that.

"Doesn't matter." He shrugged and started walking past me.

A flare of adrenaline rushed through me, firing my brain to act. I followed Tyler down the hallway,

footsteps dragging.

“Yes, it does matter.” I refrained from adding Richard to the end of that sentence.

“No, it really doesn’t,” he said.

I exhaled quickly through my nose, making what some might call a snort. Very ladylike.

“Well, you see, at establishments that serve alcohol, one must be nineteen years old. I’m eighteen, and so are you.” I motioned between us, his bright eyes following. At least he was listening, maybe.

“Thus, even with a fake, our likelihood of getting into a bar is greatly diminished. Why don’t we just cut out the effort of trying to get in, then failing, and go to a coffee shop? Or a diner? Or even back to the dorms?” I reasoned, quickening my steps to keep up with his long strides.

“Trust me,” he said.

My nose wrinkled. Trust him? Mr. Bathroom Incident™ Guy? Did he hit his head too hard on the sideboards?

Before I could get another word in, Layla bounced up next to Tyler.

“You ready to go?” she said. Tyler nodded. I stumbled mid-stride. Did they know each other?

“Beckett, let’s go sometime this year, please,” Layla called out over her shoulder, then she turned to me.

“Hey, Nat, right?”

Will, who somehow appeared next to me, replied, “Yeah, she’s interviewing Sawyer for the paper.”

Normally, I could function as a human and speak for myself, but my fuzzy thoughts couldn’t keep up with the fast-paced conversation.

“I know, I’m on the paper too.” Layla held up her camera and gave him a pointed look. Will ignored her, scrolling on his phone.

I followed with glazed eyes.

“So, we’re going to Karma? Everyone’s already over there,” Will said, looking up from his screen.

The name left a bitter tang on my tongue.

“Ugh, Karma’s always all packed and sweaty,” Layla said, echoing my thoughts. The club didn’t have the best reputation.

I scowled at Tyler. At this rate, he was going to give my gorgeous face premature eleven wrinkles.

Seemingly oblivious, he held open the door. A mumbled thanks fell out of my mouth as the crisp fall air hit me.

“We’re going to The Brew,” Tyler said.

I turned away, scratching my cheek. The Brew? Never heard of it.

Yet another boy in a suit burst out the doors and joined us, making us a group of five. He wrapped an arm around Layla’s shoulder, their skin the same shade of rich brown.

“Did I hear you say we’re going to Brew? I’m down,” he said, keys jangling as he tossed them in the air.

“Well, of course, you’d say that, ’cause Brew is boring, and you have a girlfriend,” Will said.

Layla smiled at me, shaking her head. I clamped my lips together.

“Nat, this is Beckett, my annoying cousin and our DD for the night.” She pointed to the giant at her side.

“Don’t try and hide it, I know you love me,” Beckett said, and Layla promptly punched him in the stomach.

“Nice to meet you, Nat. I play hockey with these guys.” He slipped his hand off Layla’s shoulder to shake mine.

My hands were all warm and sweaty, but there was no time to wipe them on my jeans.

After hesitating for a split second, I gave him a firm handshake. If he noticed the sweatiness, he didn’t say anything, thank God.

“Shotgun!” Will said as we approached a black Jeep. Layla rolled her eyes and went around to the other side of the car.

Tyler, Beckett, and Will dropped their bags off in the trunk. Where was I supposed to sit? I had two options since Layla went to the other side— the middle or behind the passenger seat. Both left me in an enclosed space smack dab next to You Know Who.

The middle was definitely worse. I mean, objectively speaking, it was always the most uncomfortable and never had a good headrest.

But, more importantly, it was slide-y. One sharp turn and bam, I'm basically in Tyler Sawyer's lap. For all I knew, Beckett was a sharp-turn-driver, so the middle was out of the question.

As Tyler came back around, I opened the door "After you."

"Ladies first," he said, shrugging off his suit jacket. I swallowed. Knowing exactly what was under that thin material didn't help my focus.

"I insist." I smiled, voice sickly sweet.

"No, I insist." He folded his jacket over one arm and started to roll up the sleeve of his other arm. Who knew forearms could look so good? Lord have mercy.

I snapped out of it. "Get in the car, Sawyer." I put a special emphasis on his name.

"No." He rolled up his other sleeve, stance wide.

"Why?" I said, raking a hand through my hair.

"I'm taller, and it would be tough for Beckett to see." He drummed his long fingers against the exterior of the car.

I gritted my teeth. Couldn't argue with that.

Climbing in next to Layla, I fumbled to buckle up before Tyler could put a foot in the car, avoiding the whole, scoot your butt over, oops touched your ass thing.

Well, he still had to buckle up, but it wouldn't be awkward for me because he'd be the one having to do the ass-touching. I coughed, choking on my saliva. Too much thought of ass-touching.

"Thanks for deciding to join us," said Will, who was scrolling through Spotify, phone plugged in.

I watched a flush creep across my cheeks in the rearview mirror, a green tree-shaped air freshener hanging on it. Although, from the not-so-forest-fresh smell of the car, the cardboard was likely older than me.

Tyler yanked the door closed, and the car let out a scraping whine as the starter tried to catch.

He buckled himself in, movements smooth and sure. His fingers barely grazed my side, but I froze anyways, nerve endings stirring. He stretched his long legs out in front of him and leaned back, leg brushing mine.

I examined the muddy floor mats.

With the squeak of the clutch being engaged, we were out of there.

Layla hummed along to the song Will chose, bobbing her head on the beat and Beckett tapped the steering wheel to the deep bass of the song.

I cleared my throat, wracking my brain to think of something to ask the person sitting to my right. The person I had a whole list of questions to ask but were nowhere to be found when I needed them.

He stared straight ahead, blue gaze clear.

Luckily, the car came to a quick, jerky stop. Huh. We'd gone in the opposite direction of the dorms, away from campus.

There was no long line of people waiting outside the establishment to be let in, or a girl to take cover fees and stamp hands with the club's logo.

However, a well-muscled bouncer was checking IDs. Which I said I didn't have. Doors creaked as everyone got out of the Jeep.

The thump of Tyler shouldering the door to get it open jolted me. I scrambled after him.

With dark windows, from the outside, I couldn't tell much about "The Brew," as the letters on the

brick building read.

Tyler and I trailed behind the rest of them.

“Last chance to go do the interview somewhere normal, like a coffee shop. Tim Hortons is just over there.” I waved to the red sign across the street. “I’ll buy you a coffee, and who doesn’t like coffee. My blood-caffeine level would be higher than the legal limit if one existed. More caffeine in me than a truckload of Red Bull. If I don’t get my cup of Joe, I’ll go into withdrawals. You wouldn’t want that, would you?” I asked.

He shook his head, hair curled up under his cap, eyes gleaming.

However, we didn’t stop, we kept going closer and closer to the bouncer dude.

Push come to shove, I’d cluck like a chicken and whip out Mia’s ID.

“You’re really annoying, you know that,” I mumbled to him.

“Uh-huh,” he grunted, nudging me forward.

The empty pit in my stomach was large enough to rival the library of books I had downloaded to my phone.

My fight or flight response from my prehistoric ancestors were gonna kick in at any second as I stared up at the dark eyes of the bouncer.

I gulped. Stupid, slow prehistoric instincts.

Tyler just stood there with that smug look on his face.

Screw you, stupid Tyler Sawyer.

My face while writing this chapter: *PURE EXCITEMENT*

What do you think of the book so far? Is anything confusing? Opinion on the characters? Who's your fave? What about the pacing? Are the chapters too long, too short? Just right, Goldilocks?

I'd also love to know how you're doing! What would you rate your day on a scale of 1-10? I'm a solid 10 'cause I'm SO excited to read your comments!

(Oh, and here's your reminder to **vote**! And maybe share this story with your friends if you like it... okay, bye for real now!)

5 | Dramatic Fist Slams

“I still can’t believe you didn’t tell me your uncle owns the place,” I said to the boy sitting across from me. Tyler Sawyer’s uncle freaking owned this bar-pub-club mashup, The Brew.

“Wasn’t important.” He slung his arm across the back of the booth, fingers brushing a forgotten, half-empty pint of beer.

“So, the little scene outside was for shits and giggles?” I folded my arms across my chest and leaned forward, ridges of the rough-hewn table, digging into my skin.

In a frazzled haze, I rambled complete nonsense to the bouncer for so long I was sure he was going to tell us to leave him the hell alone. When I paused to take a breath, Tyler nodded the weird guy-chin-raise-thing at the bouncer, who I now knew as his cousin CJ, and let us in.

“It was fun watching you squirm,” he said, a single dimple popping up.

Ugh! I dragged a hand through my dark hair. Instead of a green crystal, dimples had to be my kryptonite.

“I told the boys I’d go out, and since you had to interview me, we had to go someplace I wouldn’t get swarmed. You do realize we won the first game of the season tonight, right?” His voice was clear over sports fanatics shouting at the TV.

How could little old me forget Tyler Sawyer was Summit University hockey royalty? Shaking my head, I squinted down at my phone’s screen for more questions. “So, we’ve covered hockey from your pee-wee days to high school. What made you choose Summit?”

“Had to go somewhere.” His dimple disappeared. Tyler leaned forward, arms resting on the table.

“There are plenty of great hockey teams, why here?” I paused to examine him. He’d been a little less monosyllabic than usual with the other questions.

“Why not here?” He twisted the ring on his pinky, gaze on the wall-mounted flat-screen TVs over the bar.

I rubbed my brow. Guess Summit was a no-go topic. He turned the ring again, revealing the same emblem as Will's hookup ring.

"So, you actually wear your ring?" I asked.

He paused mid-ring-twist, giving me a blank look.

I fidgeted with a thin paper napkin. "Will lost his ring, I helped him find it, told me the whole thing about giving it to girls to hook up, or something."

"Right, to hook up. Of course, he'd say that." He scoffed, gaze going cloudy. "This ring is never leaving my finger again, I can tell you that much." Duly noted.

"Last time it did, it cost me a championship."

I strained to hear him over the loudmouth sitting in the booth over. He banged his hand repeatedly against the wood tables to emphasize whatever he was going on about.

If I heard Tyler right, I wasn't about to touch that comment with a ten-foot pole. Nope. Not gonna do it.

I threw him a sidelong glance, low lighting casting shadows across his face.

What, he hooked up with the wrong girl, and he lost a game? Big deal.

“Well, you have no shortage of girls here, regardless of the ring thing,” I said. How could I help myself? He dangled the carrot right in front of my nose.

“True.” He leaned back and interlocked his hands behind his head. “They all know what they’re getting into, always no-strings-attached.” He gave an oh-so-modest grin.

Oof. Now his head wouldn’t be able to fit into a helmet. Better fix that.

“You did have one unhappy customer.” I crossed my legs. A waitress dressed in a short black skirt with a money pouch and apron holding a pen and notepad passed by.

“What?” He tucked in his upper lip, eyes looking up and slightly to the left. “Who?”

Your turn to squirm, buddy. Face upturned, I didn’t even wrinkle my nose at the cigarette odour wafting off a smoker’s clothing nearby.

His lips pursed as my fingers formed a steeple between us. Soon, our noses would be touching.

“The girl that was mad at you earlier, Richard.” Obviously, he did something to upset her.

He shook his head.

My mouth twitched, itching to grin. Gotcha with that one.

“She wasn’t mad.” He waved a hand.

My power steeple crumbled as I drew my hands back. So much for my career as a supervillain. Doofenshmirtz always had a killer steeple hand pose for his villain monologues.

“She called you a dick,” I countered.

“Well, she wasn’t mad at me, per se. It’s really your fault.” He laughed, flashing straight pearly whites. Actually, the pointy one had a chip.

His laugh died off, lips covering the teeth openly stared at. I flicked my gaze up.

“How could that possibly be my fault?” My palms dampened.

His eyes glinted. Did he think I was looking at his lips for any other reason to than to find the imperfection that had to be there? Because I

certainly hadn't noticed his full, pink lips. Or his dimples. Eyes only on his dental work.

"I had to blow her off tonight for your interview, so you're welcome." He raised his cap with one hand and ran the other through his hair before tugging the hat back on.

"Oh. Thanks, I guess." I could've sworn he had dark hair. Had I only seen it wet? It was a whole mix of different shades of brown, some blonde in there too. It had to be dyed, nature didn't make hair that nice.

The gurgle of foam spitting out of a tap attached to a nearly empty keg interrupted my new career in hairdressing. So much for hard-hitting journalism, sorry Christiane Amanpour.

"Alright, back to the matter at hand. I need something personal, a fun fact," I said. This article was shaping up to be a timeline from birth with no hint of who Tyler Sawyer was off the ice.

"No, you don't." He rolled his eyes, dart thumping the board on the wall behind him. A little to the right, please, drunk lady wearing Juicy sweats. On second thought, a dart to the head would likely just bounce off the hockey star.

“Yeah, I do. We have to show the whole picture, you’re not on the ice 24/7.” I gestured in a circular motion. Perhaps my words didn’t penetrate his thick skull. I wanted the whole, entire painting of his life. Better than the Mona Lisa.

“Who says I’m not? Hockey’s a big part of my life.” He pressed a fist against his lips.

My blood pressure rose, the scrape of forks and knives grating on my nerves.

“Me,” I spoke through clenched teeth, “I say you’re not.”

His eyes twinkled. Was he smirking under that hand? Ugh!

I scrubbed a hand over my face. Give me something, please. Like... “Like, why thirteen?”

He moved his hand to rest it between us, displaying a wide smile. Knew it. I held my chin high, taking a deep breath.

“Thirteen’s my lucky number.” His broad shoulders gave a half-shrug.

“It’s literally the unluckiest number. Women get their period thirteen times a year, that alone makes it unlucky.”

“Didn’t know that, thanks for sharing,” he said sarcastically. Who knew Mr. Stoic had that setting?

“Shut up.” I swatted his arm.

He chuckled. “It’s always been a good number for me.”

I examined the long wooden bar with local craft beer taps and a selection of international beers.

“Look, today’s the 13th, and we won,” he said.

My eyes snapped to him. “Wait, today’s Friday the 13th!”

“Yup.”

The washroom door creaked. I flinched.

“Doesn’t that mean bad juju?” I glanced over my shoulder. Instead of Slenderman looming, the only tall guy in a suit was Beckett. He danced with Layla on the small dance floor. Will leaned on the wall next to the computer for placing orders, head angled towards a blonde waitress.

“Juju?” Tyler shook his head. “No such thing, Sunshine.” So much for being a superstitious hockey player. Or a flake. Or rude. Apart from being

occasionally distracted by the football game on the screen, he acted like, dare I say, a normal human.

“How have we been living on the same floor for three weeks, and this is the first time I’ve had a conversation with you? We live almost across the hall from each other,” I said.

“Not my fault. I’ve said hi. You run away like I’m Charles Manson,” he said. Touché.

A tingle swept up the back of my neck and across my face. I stared at water rings on the tabletop.

“Don’t take it personally.” I drew a finger through the water. “If anything, you’re more a Bundy.”

The dimple made a comeback.

He opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, Layla plopped down next to me, plastic cushioned seat sighing. I scooted closer to the wall. Pretty sure these booths weren’t designed for two.

“Kay, it’s been like two hours, ladies. You need to catch up.” She snapped her fingers in the vague direction of Will.

“You’re right, I have enough for the article. I should get going.” I patted my jacket, looking for

my phone to order an Uber.

“Don’t leave, Nat!” Layla threw her arm over my shoulder, pulling me close. Vodka and sweat, awesome. “We havta celebrate!”

Will clutched four shot glasses, carrying them above his head as he navigated between bodies.

“Shots, shots, shots, everybody!” Layla sang off-key.

Tyler clamped his lips together as I confined a laugh to a snort.

I toyed with the zipper of my jacket. Mia’s words echoed in my ears.

Natasha, you need to stop being so scared of putting yourself out there, using all your silly pro/con lists.

Will’s mouth moved as he said something to Tyler.

Gosh, you’ve never even had a boyfriend.

Layla’s arm rested on my shoulder, warm through the leather.

All you accomplish is pushing people away.

Thud.

Will slapped the shots on the table, tequila sloshing.

“Stay,” Tyler said. Did I imagine his lips moving? ‘Cause his face conveyed nothing.

My chest tightened, gaze ping-ponging between them all.

With icy, blue eyes on me, my fingertips found a cold, salt-rimmed glass.

“Cheers,” I called out and lifted my shot.

Three glasses clashed against mine.

I lost count after the first six rounds of tequila shots.

At Layla’s request, Taylor Swift blared around The Brew. We ignored the loudmouth when he flipped us the bird.

Layla danced, arms raised high.

“They say I did something bad.” I moved, maybe on the beat, though probably not. My sweaty

Summit shirt stuck to my skin, leather jacket somewhere around here.

“Then why’s it feel so good?” we sang, or, uh, screamed.

The bass thumped in my chest, banishing anything Mia-related.

The song ended. I mimed drinking water. Layla grabbed my hand, pulling me past the Juicy sweats lady whose tongue was down CJ’s throat. Rawr, cougar.

At the bar, Layla leaned over to talk to the bartender, but her words were about as clear as my thoughts.

I used the brass foot rail to hop up on a wooden stool that butt up against the high counter. Oopsie. I slid off the other side of the twirling seat.

A giggle erupted. Why wouldn’t it stay still? The seat spun, mirroring the spinning sensation in my stomach.

I leaned against the bar, stool forgotten.

A cup of water appeared in front of my face. Layla turned to the bartender, laughing at the brunette’s not-so-funny joke. Flirt away, girl.

I grabbed the plastic cup, condensation on my palm. The cold liquid slid down my parched throat, so different from the burn of tequila. Or rum. Or vodka. Not that I drank all of them that night.

My calves and feet ached. I turned around, back sagging against the bar.

I surveyed the booths. Tyler sat in the same booth from hours ago. He spun a highball glass between his hands, jaw set.

“Oh look, it’s Tyler Sawyer.” My voice came out louder than expected.

He lifted his head, eyes pinning me.

That seat sure looked comfy. I went over, holding my half-full cup.

“Why are you sitting all by yourself?” I stumbled as I got to the table.

He reached out to steady me, hand gripping my waist. Water splashed me, cold contrasting the warmth flooding me.

I swallowed, tongue darting out to touch my lips.

Tyler cleared his throat, hand still on my waist. I jerked away and slid into the booth across from him.

Much easier than the stool.

“I’m not by myself, you’re here,” he said.

“Makes sense.” My head was heavy, so I rested it in my palms, elbows on the table.

He tilted his head, regarding me.

“Why do I have to call you Sawyer?” I blurted out. “Why is your hair so shiny? Where do you get it done? I want highlights like yours, so if you have an ounce of humanity in your muscles, you’ll give me the name of your hairdresser.”

He gave me a wide-eyed look.

“Did I say muscles? I meant body. But, I mean, for you, it’s basically all the same. I know, I’ve seen under that.” I motioned at his stupidly crisp white shirt.

He smirked. “You don’t have to call me Sawyer.”

“Well, I can’t keep calling you Mr. Bathroom Incident Guy, can I?” I didn’t give him the chance to reply.

“No, I didn’t think so. And Tyler is not accurate at all, doesn’t match your face. What were your parents thinking? Calling you Tyler is like calling

me Tasha. Puke-worthy. So, what am I left with?" I scowled.

"Bubkis, that's what." I slammed my fist.

Nobody around even reacted.

"I thought my dramatic fist slam would be louder. Underwhelming," I said.

"My hair's all-natural, I have the sun and genetics to thank. Ty's an option if you want." He spread out in the booth, arms stretching, highlighting toned muscles.

"That's just great." I threw my face down, resting flat on the germ-infested table.

"You good?" he asked.

"It's fine, I'm fine. I don't care anymore that I'll never have a boyfriend. Who cares if I'm an eighty-year-old-virgin? Not me. And clearly, you don't care either, 'cause your hair's not fair." My voice was muffled by the table.

"That rhymed." I sniggered. "And I want Ty. That sounds wrong. You know what I mean. Ty works. I'll take it, sold for the free price of nothing." I lifted my head, so my chin rested on my splayed hands.

“Glad we cleared that up. Drink some more water.” He nudged my cup over.

I grumbled but gulped it down.

“Happy?” I sat back, leaning into the cushioned seats.

“Very.”

A greasy scent wafted past. Chicken wings? No. Nachos?

“You’ve never had a boyfriend?” Ty’s voice rose.

“Yessiree. How do you know?” I scanned the considerably less busy seating area in search of the source of the greasiness. “Whatever, doesn’t matter.”

“Why not?” he said.

“Why not what?” My eyes narrowed. The blonde waitress carried a red basket. Fries! I wanted those fries in all their salty glory. Yum.

“No boyfriend,” Ty repeated.

The fries disappeared from view. “Ah, yes.” I nodded sagely, “Boy looks in my general direction, I run. Alec, point in case. Case in point?”

“Alec?”

“Mhm, cute guy in lit class.” I sighed, hunching in my seat. “I’ll never make the first move, and I missed my chance at my Mr. Darcy.”

“Why don’t you text him?” His brow furrowed. Squirmy caterpillars. At least he had bushy eyebrows. Would he let me tweeze them?

“Thumbs not capable.” I wiggled them in front of his face.

“Give me your phone, I’ll do it.” Ty held out an upturned palm.

“Why?” I jutted my chin out.

“Why not?” he said.

Makes sense. I dug around in my back pocket for my phone and slapped the pastel case into Ty’s hand.

I grabbed two little plastic sword drink embellishments left over from Layla’s bellinis, one in each hand. En garde, Monsieur Finger!

Ty’s thumbs moved across the screen, clicking sound as he typed. Monsieur Finger 1 defeated Monsieur Finger 2.

“Here, send that.” He turned the phone to face me.

The words swam in front of my eyes. I snatched it out of Ty's grasp.

"I can't." I didn't even read the gobbledygook.

"Yes, you can," he assured me.

"Nope." I frowned.

"I dare you to send it." He tapped the top of the phone. "And, in return, I'll do a dare too. Or truth, whatever."

"Anything?" I asked.

"Anything." Ty agreed.

I tilted my head in a side-to-side rhythm. A pro/con list tried to form in my mind, but I kept forgetting how many I had on each side.

All you accomplish is pushing people away.

Did you ever think it's smarter to keep them out, Mia?

"I can't!" I tore my eyes from the screen.

"Just press send, Nat," Ty said.

My stomach roiled. I swiped out of the app and turned off my phone, shoving it back in my pocket.

“I’m gonna yack,” I announced.

“Alright, let’s get you out of here.” Ty broke eye contact.

“You are so not fair,” I mumbled as he helped me out of the booth.

“Gonna have to help me out with that one.” He ducked under my arm.

I gripped his shoulder tighter when the world went all swirly. We moved towards the door.

“You drank as much as me, and you’re sober.” I flinched when the cold air hit my skin.

“No, I switched to water after my second shot. Hockey season,” he said, warm breath against my neck as he spoke directly in my ear.

I fumbled, lightheaded from the alcohol.

“Annoying.” I glared at him.

“Logical,” Ty said.

Head pounding, I rolled over and curled into myself. Lumpy bed.

Behind my eyelids, Ty's lips moved. *Just press send, Nat.*

Pulling my phone out my pocket, I held it in front of me. I groaned as the light illuminated the space between the screen and my face.

Just press send, huh? Simple as that?

I copied the pro/con lists from my notes and opened each of my crush's Instagrams.

@PabloRamirez. *Send.*

@BlakeHill. *Send.*

@ColbyScott. *Send.*

@LoganKalua. *Send.*

@AlecItoRussell. *Send.*

My eyes drooped closed, and I dropped the phone to my chest.

Five crushes, five messages sent.

□SHE SENT THE MESSAGES PEOPLE. THE
MESSAGES HAVE BEEN SENT. EEK!□

What do you think is going to happen next? So far, have I met your expectations for the story? Is it

easy to follow?

Also, how did you discovered JPS? Was it recommended to you by a friend? Did you just randomly click on it (if ya did, where'd you see it)? Did you find it on IG/Twitter/other socials? Lmk, I'm curious!

Speaking of socials, don't forget to tag me and use #JustPressSend if you post a quote or anything like that so I can repost and share it! Wattpad makes it super easy where you can just highlight text from the book and share it as a quote□

And, how could I forget to remind you to **vote**?

Thank you so much for all your support, can't wait for you to read more!♥

6 | The Great Whipped Cream Debate of '19

Dear idiot blow-drying your hair before the butt crack of dawn,

I wouldn't be mad if you strangled yourself with the cord.

Sincerely,

The girl next door trying to sleep.

The idiot changed the setting, emitting a higher-pitched screech through the wall.

My body temperature under the tangle of blankets rose to an uncomfortable level. I kicked off the sheets, face in the mattress. Throwing out an arm, I patted blindly for a pillow to hold over my bleeding ears.

I found soft, cotton sheets, no pillows. Huh.

With a groan, I lifted my throbbing head and pried my crusty eyelids open.

Light shone through the thin, university-provided curtains, right into my delicate eye sockets.

Ugh!

I dropped my head back into the mattress, dark purple sheets providing momentary relief. But, the buzzing didn't stop, whooshing as Rapunzel dried her precious hair. She could take her hairdryer and shove—

Wait. Purple sheets. Not the pastel pink sheets I spent an inordinate amount of money on.

My mouth went dry. I rolled over onto my back, ignoring the protest of stiff muscles. Where did I fall asleep last night?

Hayley Kiyoko stared down at me from the ceiling.

I poked my tongue into my cheek. Awesome poster, but not mine. I swung my legs off the side of the bed, and my bare feet hit the cold carpet. My spine straightened faster than a puppet on a string.

Filly pillows piled up on the opposite end of the bed.

I shook my head. How did I manoeuvre myself to sleep with my head at the foot of the bed?

Everything in the single room had a place, from the full shoe rack by the door to the highlighters organized on the desk. The mystery room owner went so far as to tack their schedule on their Summit cork board with a purple tack.

I dragged my butt closer, feet shuffling against the carpet.

The weight on my chest lightened as my eyes narrowed on the glorious eight and a half by eleven slip of paper.

Umaru, Layla: Student Number 436897 read the small print of the schedule.

Tension drained from my muscles. I flopped into Layla's desk chair and pressed a hand to my heart. Crisis averted.

Someway, somehow, I ended up here in Layla's room. What happened last night? We did the interview, I danced with Layla, but the rest was fuzzy.

I rubbed my bottom lip. Why'd Layla let me stay here last night?

A collage of stunning photos was pinned above the schedule.

I wrapped my arms around myself. Certainly, I was no expert, but I recognized professional-quality photos.

Scattered among the artsy shots were pictures of Layla with groups of people. They were those blurry ones taken in the moment, not that I had many of those to put on my wall.

I turned away from the collage, fidgeting with the hem of my shirt.

My clothes from last night were still on my body, stiff and sweat-encrusted.

Lifting my arm, I took a whiff. Jeez. Why didn't I go back to my room, the room right down the hall from Ty's?

Ty? A wisp of a memory floated by, but it slipped away before I could catch it. For some reason, now Tyler Sawyer was Ty to me. Weird.

The hairdryer droned on.

The ache in my skull refused to leave, more stubborn than Mom when she went on one of her diets. I massaged my temple, squeezing my eyes shut.

My bra straps dug into my sore shoulders, waves of nausea ebbing and flowing.

I shifted on the cushion-less chair and ran a hand through my hair. Well, my hand got stuck in tangles halfway through, so I yanked it out. Ouch.

My stomach lurched. Look at the bright side, right? Be a cup half full person, Nat. At least this wasn't as bad as orientation week.

I shuddered. Tequila was never a good idea. Showers were good ideas, though.

Pushing the chair back from the desk, I knocked over a little desk calendar. I bent to grab it, nausea back with a vengeance. Fighting past it, I returned the calendar to its rightful place.

I flipped the pages back to the correct month, September. My eyes followed the trail of black X's on the calendar to Saturday, September 14.

My legs went shaky. I clutched the edge of the flimsy desk. Shiitake mushrooms! The article! What time was it?

I whirled around, chewing the inside of my cheek.

Pastel pink poked out from the tangle of purple blankets.

Aha! I grabbed my phone and flipped it over.

The screen lit up, revealing banner notifications with the Instagram logo.

A bout of dizziness hit me. I dropped the phone faster than I stopped watching Dr. Who when Matt Smith left. A hand flew to my chest, fingers fanned out against my breastbone.

Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ.

I sent the pro/con lists.

“No, no, no,” I mumbled, shaking my head.

My back hit the wall. I couldn’t draw enough air into my lungs.

The phone sat on the bed, an evil reminder of what I did.

The metallic taste of blood filled my mouth from the raw skin of my inner cheek.

A breeze drifted in through the open window, cooling my overheated skin. I smoothed my clothes, reigning in my galloping heart.

I had to reply. I had to do something.

Exhaling, my eyes went up to the ceiling. Haley stared at me, disapprovingly.

I licked my lips. All I had to do was make a pro/con list and decide whether or not to reply. Easy peasy lemon squeezy.

The cons roared to the forefront of my mind. Having to actually text them back and explain my unexplainable, idiotic lists. Face them in-person. Rejection.

Maybe I'd move to Timbuktu. They must have a university there.

Pro/con lists got me into this mess in the first place, how could they help me now?

My momentary burst of energy faded. I sat back down, the springy give of the bed welcoming. Rubbing at my eyes, my shoulders hunched.

I slid back under the sheets, head on a pillow this time around.

My head pounded, and nothing made sense, not even my pro/con list. With a numbness in my core, I curled into myself.

The blow-dryer shut off. I'd deal with this later.

With that thought, I let go, drifting off into a listless sleep.

But, somewhere buried deep, I knew nothing would be the same.

“Excuse me, there is no such thing as too much whipped cream, thank you very much,” I said, adding another squirt to my plate. Yummy, fluffy waffles. Perfection.

“I respectfully have to disagree with you there—you need the right waffle to whipped cream ratio, and that’s a fact,” Layla said, shaking cinnamon on her minuscule dollops of whipped cream.

“I’m glad we can agree to disagree.” I smiled, shaking my head.

We lined up to pay, meal cards ready to be swiped.

Around noon Layla came back to her room with two coffees in hand. As it turns out, she lived in the same dorm on the other side.

We made small talk, then I went back to my room to shower and change 'cause I smelled worse than the time I got sprayed by a skunk. I maintained that it was Mia's fault for scaring the demonic animal, but whatever. I had nobody to blame but myself this time.

Layla and I agreed to meet at the Saturday waffle bar, resulting in The Great Whipped Cream Debate.

I dusted crumbs off a hard plastic chair before I settled at the end of a long table.

Garish fluorescent light strips ran across the ceiling in addition to the rays pouring through the windows.

I angled my head down towards my tray. Why did it have to be so bright in here?

Layla came up behind me. She lagged, chatting with the kitchen staff wearing white aprons and hairnets. Her tray slammed down on the table.

I winced, head still sensitive, despite the two coffees and aspirin in my system.

"Oops, sorry," she said, sliding into the seat across from me.

I waved a hand and focused on cutting up my waffle. The sooner I finished eating, the sooner I could go deal with the article.

“So, last night was really something, huh?” Layla leaned forward and sipped her mug.

My stomach knotted. I grimaced, a strand of wet hair falling out of my bun. “From the little I remember, we had quite the night.”

Layla paused mid-sip, gaze sharpening. “You don’t remember?”

“You do?” I raised a brow. “You drank more than me, woman.” I popped a piece of waffle in my mouth.

“Well, I drank a ton of water last night, and you spilled the water all over your shirt when I tried to get some in you,” she laughed, sound clear over dishes clattering and clanging in the kitchen.

My chest tightened. I rubbed the back of my neck, leaning back in my chair. “What did happen last night?”

“We danced and went to go get water, you disappeared, then reappeared with Sawyer, don’t

know what you guys did.” She displayed a broad grin.

I dragged a sweaty palm down my sweats. We did something ending with me calling him Ty.

“Anyways, Beckett drove us back to the dorm, but of course, we stopped for McDonald’s.” Layla’s eyes twinkled. Uh oh.

“I literally have no clue what you’re talking about.” I set my fork and knife down. The waffle became less appealing by the second.

“You got chicken nuggets?” she said, voice rising at the end.

I stared at her, expression blank. The suction sound of a sealed fridge door opening echoed.

“You refused to share the nugs with Will, then got mad at him when he stole the honey mustard dipping sauce. You poured ice down his back, that was hilarious.” She slapped her knee, giggles escaping.

My cheeks heated as my eyes flitted over the room. We caught the attention of a group of guys at the table over. I leaned closer. “I poured ice down his shirt? You’re joking,” I whispered and gave her a

wide-eyed look that got her dissolving into laughter again.

“Seriously,” she gasped for air, “You’re very protective of your food.”

My face, neck, and ears were impossibly hot. I shoved my hands into the pockets of my hoodie. “Go on,” I said.

“Beckett dropped us off, we all went back to Sawyer and Will’s room. You started reciting The Bee Movie script, by the way, how do you know that? It was so spot on.” Layla cupped an elbow with one hand while tapping her lips with the other, both our trays abandoned.

“Irrelevant, continue.” I prodded her to keep going. She didn’t need to hear about my weird Bee Movie phase in the eighth grade, she already had enough ammunition against me.

Shoes squeaked against the floor as more students came in for a late Saturday lunch.

Layla continued on, voice loud, “We all hung out for a bit, then the room started getting busy, so me and you went out to the quad.”

“Will and Ty didn’t come with us?” I asked, tongue darting out to wet my lips.

“Nope,” Layla said.

I briefly closed my eyes. Nothing else to embarrass me, thank goodness.

“But, we were lying out there, and some RAs found us,” she chuckled.

That was great, just great.

“I talked us out of getting a strike, ’cause you were rambling about how unlucky Friday the 13th was, even though I told you it was past midnight and officially the 14th,” Layla went on, but the whirl of the microwave zapping someone’s leftovers roared in my ears.

My head jerked back, breath hitching.

Friday the 13th. Manson. Bundy. Eighty-year-old-virgin. Fries. The dare.

Ohmysweetgoodness, I’d never be able to face Ty again.

“By then, it was time to call it a night, so I took you back to your floor, but neither of us could figure out where your room key was,” she said.

I blinked, eyes wide.

“It’s right here on the back of my phone.” I pulled out the object in question and waved the cardholder at the back in front of her face.

She shrugged. “We weren’t quite at our best at four in the morning.”

I stared at my palms like they knew the reasoning behind my decisions last night.

“Sawyer heard us laughing in the hallway, and he helped me get you back to my room, where you passed out on my bed.” She rested her elbows on the tabletop perpetually covered in salt granules.

“I remembered dancing with you, you flirting with the bartender, but now it’s coming back to me,” I cringed.

“Oh yeah, she’s hot. Got her number, I should text her,” Layla said, pulling out her phone.

My ribs squeezed tight at her effortless ability to just text the girl she likes. As simple as that. My mouth thinned. She didn’t need to get blackout drunk to send stupid pro/con lists to her crushes, did she?

The whoosh of an iMessage being sent sounded, and she looked back up at me.

“Ugh, don’t get me started on texting,” I groaned. “Someone needs to take my phone away from me forever.” I slid the thing farther from me on the table.

“Why?” she said, picking at her now cold waffle.

I pulled at my ear, avoiding her gaze. How could she understand my awkwardness? But, we must have formed some sort of bond through the events of last night, because something inside me let the words fall out.

“So, for the past couple weeks, I’ve been making these pro/con lists for all the boys I kinda have crushes on,” I said.

She nodded, taking a long sip from her mug.

“Well, at some point last night, I sent all five of them their very embarrassing pro/con lists.” My knee bounced, almost hitting the bottom of the table.

Layla spluttered, choking on the coffee. “You didn’t!”

I buried my face in my hands. “I did!”

“What did they say?” she asked, chair scratching against the ground as she slid closer.

“I don’t know!” I said, voice muffled through my hands.

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” Layla tilted her head to the side.

I looked at her through my fingers. “I still haven’t checked, I can’t.”

“So who are the mystery boys? I need all the details, girl,” she said, slow smile building on her lips.

I gave a sheepish grin. “There’s Alec, this cute guy from my lit class who’s smart and all-around an amazing human. Pablo, he’s so nice, he’s the editor of the paper. Well, you know that,” I said.

I eyed the double swinging doors out of the caf, but couldn’t stop the train wreck coming out of my mouth.

“Um, there’s Blake, this guy I met at a concert during orientation week. Colby, who I met on the day in the summer when we came to pick our courses and whatnot,” I said.

Layla nodded, motioning for me to continue.

I looked up, counting in my head. “Oh, and Logan, I know him from summer camp. I saw him in line at Tims the other day, and all the reasons I had a crush on him back when I was thirteen popped up, like a Whack-A-Mole.”

Layla held up a hand as if to say *No more!* “That’s so crazy, you’ve got balls, I’ll give you that.”

I opened and closed my mouth, regarding the phone. In one decisive motion, I shoved it over to Layla. “You read it and tell me, I can’t do it.”

When she picked up the little pink phone, it buzzed.

My heartbeat picked up. “Who?” I asked in a halting voice.

She squealed, and I swallowed, hard. Dear God, knowing my luck, it was Alec.

Her bright eyes met mine.

So, whaddya think? We saw more of Layla in this chapter, so what’re your thoughts on her, or the antics they got up to?

I’m so excited to read your comments and reply to them all— it’s my favourite part of the day. I’m

sending you virtual hugs, especially those of you who leave a whole bunch of lovely comments□

Don't forget to press that little itty bitty star on the corner of your screen to **vote** for this chapter!

In the next chapter, we'll find out who texted back! Eek!

7 | Crappy Comebacks

“Just tell me who it is!” I said.

The girl wearing pyjamas seated behind Layla slurped pop through a straw and stared at us, openly.

My jaw stiffened as my fingers tapped the tabletop. Nothing to see here, plastic-straw-using-turtle-killing person.

Layla’s eyes lit with an inner glow. She shoved my shoulder, offering a smile.

“Chill, Nat. It’s @ColbyScott, ’kay?” Layla put my phone down and skewered a strawberry on her fork, juice running down the metal prongs.

I pressed the heel of my palms to my eyes. Not Alec. I swallowed and nodded, shoving my hands into the pouch of my hoodie.

“What did he say?” I fidgeted with the weird fluff that always accumulated on the soft side of the fabric.

I rolled my stiff shoulders. Jeez, could Layla chew a strawberry any slower?

Layla wiped her mouth with a brown napkin. “I thought you didn’t want to know?”

“Well, I changed my mind. I can’t not know.” Tiny beads of sweat collected on my upper lip. I pulled the hoodie away from my body. I’d take it off, but nobody would appreciate seeing my hot pink bra. Should’ve worn a shirt.

Layla unlocked my phone, thumb sliding over the glass screen.

My mouth opened, but nothing came out. How’d Layla get my password? I shut my mouth. Probably, something last night required her knowledge of my 6-digit code.

“He basically said that he’s flattered, but he dropped out before school started. Doesn’t want to do the whole long-distance dating thing, so this one was a miss,” she said.

A soreness scratched my throat and lungs. I picked up my knife and fork and sawed off a piece of hard waffle. My grip tightened on the cold metal. I’d only known Colby for a day anyways. I stabbed

the fried dough and shoved it in my mouth. What did I expect?

“Let’s look at the rest of them.” Layla drummed her feet against the floor.

“No!” I shook my head. “I don’t think I can handle any more rejection,” I laughed, the sound hollow.

Layla swatted my arm. “Pfft, that wasn’t a rejection. This Colby guy doesn’t even go here, so it’s onward and upward from here.”

My gaze drifted to the heat lamps that turned on as the kitchen staff began serving lunch. A ladle full of lasagne slopped on a plate, sauce splashing over the sides.

My nose wrinkled. “I don’t know.”

“You know you wanna,” she teased.

Pyjama girl tore open a crinkly chip bag. I crossed my arms. Did I want to be her, the girl eavesdropping on someone else’s conversation, sitting alone?

“Okay, fine, who else replied?” I squared my shoulders, but without any real strength behind me.

Humming, Layla swiped into my DMs. “@PabloRamirez and @BlakeHill. Blake’s pretty cute, I approve.” She scrolled, presumably through his feed.

My adrenaline spiked.

“Don’t like anything!” I shuddered Liking their photos was the kiss of death— I’d be forever labelled the creepy stalker girl.

“This isn’t my first rodeo, I got it.” Layla rolled her eyes, the light green not red-rimmed like mine. Not fair that I had to be such a lightweight.

“Okay, tell me what they said,” I muttered, “But don’t open them, because then they’ll know I’ve read it. Just tell me what you know from the little preview thing.” I uncrossed and recrossed my legs.

Layla pursed her lips. “Not a lot to go on.”

She stared at the screen.

My breathing grew louder. I motioned for Layla to hurry up. “Tell me before I change my mind.”

Oil hissed and bubbled as a basket of fries lowered into a vat. Layla glanced over her shoulder at the loud distraction.

I tilted my head up, gaze looking heavenward. Someone give me patience before I go Hulk crazy.

Layla turned back to me. “From what I understand, Blake wants to hang sometime, and Pablo’s just says nice things, no actual asking to go out, but it could be later in the message.”

A fluttery feeling swung up my belly, but less butterfly-like and more squirmy-wormy. I gave Layla an incredulous stare.

“What? They want to go out? Like on a date-date?” I asked, shaking out my hands in an effort to relax.

Layla bobbed her head. “Yeah, seems like it. You should go!”

A crumpled napkin sat on the table next to a dried blob of ketchup, discarded and forgotten.

I pinched the skin between my thumb and forefinger.

“No, no, no, I can’t.” My voice wavered.

“Why not?” Layla asked.

My stomach went rock hard, sickly sweet taste of whip cream lingering on my tongue. “Me, on a

date?” I pointed at myself, “Yikes.”

“I’m sure it wouldn’t be that bad,” she giggled.

I waved a hand between us, trying to find words to articulate the many reasons this was a bad idea, and knocked over her mug. Whoops.

“I’ll go grab some napkins.” I pushed my chair back. While I walked over to the station with cutlery and whatnot, my head stayed bent down at my slipper-clad feet.

With napkins in hand, I fretted over the spill. Layla couldn’t understand— she was probably popular in high school with a huge group of friends here at Summit. She didn’t need or want me to dump my crap on her lap.

“I don’t think I’ll reply, I’ll just deal with it later,” I said, fidgeting with the unused napkins.

“Well, let me know if you change your mind. I’m great at picking out date outfits, it’s my specialty.” Layla stood up too.

“I’ll let you know,” I said. Yeah, right.

Me replying was about as likely as me voluntarily talking to Ty again.

Well, it turns out talking to Ty again was more likely and unavoidable than I thought.

Sighing, I took in the small room.

Sturdy bookshelves lined the walls, mainly filled with musty encyclopedias, thick dictionaries and obsolete atlases. Shoes tapped on the staircase outside, followed by laughter as a group of students passed by.

I brushed little eraser bits off the table before resting my elbows there.

The clock above the door ticked, audible over the creak of my chair.

Did I get the time he said to meet wrong? I pulled out my phone and swiped into our brief conversation.

Saturday, September 14th, 4:32am

“Tyler Sawyer” name changed to “Mr. Bathroom Incident”

My stomach dropped. Right. Friday night was a thing that happened. I dipped my chin and continued reading.

Saturday, September 14th, 3:48pm

“Mr. Bathroom Incident” name changed to “Ty”

Sunday, September 15th, 8:46pm

Did you turn in the article yet, or can you make changes?

I sent in the rough draft to my editor, but I can still make some changes if need be, no problem. Thanks again for doing the interview!

I used one exclamation mark, normal, not psycho.

Can we meet before you turn it in?

Yeah, for sure! ☺ I’m free for the rest of the night or Tuesday afternoon. Tuesday’s cutting it a little close cause it’s due Wednesday tho

Okay, the creepy smiley face bordered on psycho, but oh well. Couldn’t take it back now.

Can’t tonight @ dinner w fam. Tuesday?

Sure! See you then!

Tuesday, September 17th, 8:43am

Where and what time do you want to meet? I’m done classes at 3:00, so any time after that works for

me! I'll come back to the dorms, so somewhere here would be best for me.

Library @ 7

Okay!

I put my butt in this chair at 7:00. Unless I forgot how to read the hands of a clock, it was almost 7:20.

Tick.

A backpack zipper opened.

Tock.

A mouse clicked.

Tick.

A printer whirred.

Tock.

I glared at the string of messages.

7:20. Son of a gun.

My fingers flew across the screen. Was I ever going to send this? No. But, a girl's gotta vent. *Does 7 have a different meaning for you? Because, in my book, 7 means 7:00 pm Eastern Standard Time, not*

on Ty Time. Got things to do, people to see and all that. I have half a mind to get up right now and—

“Waiting long?” a familiar, deep voice said.

I held the phone tightly against my chest.

“Nope, all good,” I replied. Thank you for gracing me with your presence, Ty.

He pulled out the chair across from me and set down his bag.

I glanced down at my phone. Delete, delete, delete. My finger slipped, and I pressed the little blue arrow. Crap!

His phone dinged, the sound muffled by the fabric of his bag.

My spine straightened. I took deep, controlled breaths. Be chill, Nat.

He sat, tall frame folding into the chair.

I chewed my bottom lip, eyes darting to his bag. Where was the unsend button when I needed it? I gulped.

“You’re not gonna check that?” I blurted out.

“Nope.” He leaned his elbows on the armrests, spreading out.

My scalp prickled. “Well, just ignore it when you see it,” I said and cleared my throat. How did Ty make a hoodie look hot? I wore ’em for comfort but was well aware that I resembled a sack of potatoes.

“Now, I’m curious.” He smirked and leaned down to grab his phone.

Ugh. I squirmed, sinking lower in my chair.

The screen lit up the sharp contours of his face.

“You really don’t have to—” I stammered.

His eyes flashed to me. “So you were waiting.” He cut in.

“You said seven, I was here at seven.” I shrugged, shoulders almost brushing my ears.

“I did say that,” Ty said.

Staring at a sign about the importance of literacy, I avoided the bright blue eyes that made my mouth move without permission from my brain.

From the rustle of fabric, I assumed Ty put his phone away.

My knee bounced. Please say nothing about Friday night. Friday night did not happen, it's wiped from my memory Men In Black-style.

"No more Mr. Bathroom Incident, huh? I liked that name," he said, pointing at my face-up phone left on our conversation. Rookie mistake.

Ears hot, I rubbed my palms on my jeans.

"I didn't actually think of you as Mr. Bathroom Incident," I trailed off, "I was drunk and said a lot of things that are very, very not true."

"What's that saying?" He tilted his head to gaze out the window.

Look at him, pondering out the window, musing. If only Shakespeare wore a baseball cap, Ty would be a splitting image.

His eyes returned to mine. "A drunk tongue's an honest one?"

"You can believe whatever you want to believe." I raised my chin. Why couldn't I think of a wittier reply? Instead, I'd be replaying this conversation in my head while I tried to fall asleep and come up with a real zinger.

"Sure, Sunshine."

“Ew. Stop it with the nickname.” I folded my arms across my chest.

“I let you call me Ty, it’s only fair I get a nickname. That is unless you’d prefer, say, Tasha?” He settled back into his chair with exaggerated casualness.

I scowled. Footsteps thudded overhead.

“Whatever,” I said. My annoying twelve-year-old cousin had better comebacks than me.

My phone buzzed.

I snatched it off the table and into my lap before Ty could snoop any more.

“So, why did you want to meet?” I asked.

My eyes darted down to my lap. For a split second, my breathing suspended. I tightened my grip on the phone. Ohmysweetgoodness.

“Coach found out about the article and wanted to make sure that we’re on the same page about the whole misunderstanding with the fan at the game on Friday.” Ty rubbed the back of his neck.

“Right, the misunderstanding,” I said. The notification across my screen came from

@AlecItoRussell. @AlecItoRussell! My pulse quickened, a grin breaking out.

@AlecItoRussell replied to my message.

“Yeah, I apologized, and we cleared it up, but the team’s been getting some backlash,” he said, scratching the dry skin on his hand.

I nodded rather than speaking. Biting down on my smile, I smoothed down my shirt. Alec replied!

“So, Coach wanted me kinda make sure you’re, uh, what did he call it— painting me in a good light?” he stumbled over the words.

“Yup, for sure.” I looked down at the shiny message. What did Alec say?

“Glad that’s all cleared up then. See you around, Sunshine.”

I stared at the empty seat across from me.

Wait.

What did Ty do at the game?

Another chapter bites the dust! What did you think of Nat, Layla, and Ty? Or the responses to her

messages? Ou and what do you guys think happened at the game while Nat had her nose in her phone?

Real question for you though: Pancakes or waffles? Waffles all the way for me!

VOTE

THANKS

PEACE ✌

(me trying to be concise)

8 | Banana Peels

@AlecItoRussell: *Hey, Nat! Nice to hear from you. Not gonna lie, this was a little unexpected, but...*

The urge to giggle slapped me across the face. Me? Giggle?

Shaking my head, I leaned back in the chair. Alec Ito-Russell messaged me.

I glanced around as if others were experiencing the same smorgasbord of feelings. A guy drooled one of the other desks in the small library as he took a nap, Google Doc on his screen abandoned.

The message lit up my phone again.

I gripped the chair's armrests and grimaced. No, Instagram. I'm not going to click to expand, 'cause then he'd know I read it.

To reply, or not to reply, that was the question. Basically, I became the whiny main character of a Shakespeare tragedy that never shut up.

The sleeping guy mumbled something in his sleep.

My jaw clenched. Since when did I become *that girl*, obsessing over boys? I had an article to hand in tomorrow, and I was farther in space than Pluto when Ty told me about whatever happened with a fan. Clearly, the Bathroom Incident™ wasn't enough drama for him.

I tapped a loose fist against my lips.

Grabbing my phone, I typed out a quick message. There was one person who'd know what happened and lived in the same dorm— Micah Miller.

I pressed a hand against the cold glass door to enter the caf.

A smattering of students sat on the uncomfortable plastic chairs spaced along the rows of long tables, but Micah was nowhere in sight.

Scratching my temple, I pulled out my phone and swiped into our conversation. I texted Micah in the library, and she responded right away. *For sure, come meet me in the caf!*

I passed the booths and round tables, but her blonde head wasn't there either. The burned stench from spillovers greeted me as I crossed into the area where they served food.

None of the late-night deep-fried snacks appealed to me. I scaped a hand through my kind of greasy hair. Yikes. After I got this article over with, a hot shower was next on my list.

I found dented stainless steel counters and hot plates that kept food trays warm for serving, but no Micah.

Rubbing a hand down the leg of my sweats, I rounded the corner to the deli section.

A group of students lined up at the cash, one girl among them.

I poked my tongue into my cheek. Same petite build as Micah, but no blonde hair. Er, kinda blonde hair? More strawberry blonde with highlights. A lot could change in two years, I guess.

With her back to me, she laughed, light sound twinkling like a Disney princess.

I let out a soft exhale. Definitely Micah. I couldn't forget that laugh.

One of the guys said something to Micah after she swiped her card. Micah turned around. Her eyes lit up when they landed on me.

“Hey, Nat!” Micah bounced over and wrapped her arms around me.

“Hi, Micah.” I returned the hug.

Micah pulled back, holding me at arm’s length. “Gosh, how long has it been?”

“Since you moved at the end of Grade 10, Redview wasn’t the same without you,” I said. High school had a little less drama and became a little more boring without her.

“Aw, I’ve missed you!” She grabbed my hand and pulled me along with her. “How’ve you been?”

“Good, busy, you know.” I shrugged. We passed the register and sat in a nearby booth.

“Oh, right! I heard about your business, that’s so awesome! I had no idea you were doing any of that,” Micah said. She poked a nail into the top of her banana to peel it.

“Yeah, I didn’t talk about it much,” I nodded. It wasn’t like many people wanted to talk about profit margins in high school.

I cleared my throat. “How’re you doing?”

“I’m doing so great,” she said, slapping the table. “A bunch of people from Paramount came to Summit too, so that’s been nice.”

I leaned forward and clamped my hands in my lap. Precisely the reason I wanted to talk to Micah.

“Speaking about Paramount, did you happen to know Tyler Sawyer? He went there too, played hockey, uh, about 6’4, brownish-blond hair, doesn’t talk much—” I said, and Micah cut in.

“Yeah, I know, Sawyer.” She blew out a noisy breath. “Why?”

“Perfect.” I gave a curt nod. “The story would take longer to tell you than when Ms. Flagerty used to go off on tangents, so I’ll give you to SparkNotes. Apparently, something happened with a fan at the game on Friday, and he’s getting backlash for it. I have to write a profile on Ty for the paper and—” She cut in again, not that I blame her.

“Ty?” she squinted, brow lowering.

“Yup, Tyler Sawyer. You said you know him, right?” I tugged on an ear. Please, please know something about him.

“I dated Sawyer, so I’d say I know him pretty well.”

Oh. I blinked slowly. Maybe Micah knew a little more than something. “You dated him?” I stammered.

“Mhm, for two years, and I’ve never heard anyone call him Ty.” She peeled her banana, eyes focussed on the task.

“It’s part of a whole long story, the bathroom thing, tequila, it’s whatever, but I was wondering if you knew what happened at the game?” I wrung my hands.

She took a bite of the fruit and chewed, crossing her legs. “Sawyer threw a water bottle at some fan that was heckling him. This girl caught it on video, and it didn’t look that great for him.”

I went still and pressed my lips together. Ty had to keep complicating my life. How could I spin this to be positive in my article?

“What? When did that happen? I was there, and I didn’t see that,” I said.

“Really? It was a pretty big deal. It was like before the last period.” She gave me a sidelong

glance.

“Oh.” Might have been a little distracted by someone’s Instagram then.

“I’m not surprised, though.” She took another bite.

I tilted my head to the side. “What do you mean?”

Micah sighed and set down the rest of her banana. She leaned forward, resting her chin on her hand.

“Sawyer’s a total hothead. He dumped me right before prom because he blew this one thing out of proportion. But that’s in the past, moving onto bigger and better things. Emphasis on bigger,” she snickered.

“Micah!” I exclaimed, toes curling up. Too weird to think or talk about Ty’s— yeah, nope.

“I’m sure you’re no nun, Nat,” she laughed. “What’s happening for you?”

“Ugh, don’t get me started.” I looked down, unable to meet her eyes.

She shoved my shoulder. “Spill!”

“It’s all Ty’s fault, actually.” I rolled my eyes.

She snorted.

I poked the skin of her banana, pressing into the slight give of the ripe fruit. I should trust her, tell her the whole story. My nail dug in, leaving a crescent-shaped mark.

The whole kit and caboodle tumbled out my mouth. So much for the SparkNotes version.

The kitchen staff dragged down the huge metal shutters to close up the caf. Jeez, I had to get back to fix up the article for the newspaper meeting tomorrow.

Micah rubbed at an eyelid. “So, you’re telling me you have three guys lined up to take you out, and you’re not doing anything about it?”

“I wouldn’t say they’re lined up,” I trailed off.

She scoffed. “You should go for it! Why not?”

My throat squeezed tight, chin dropping to my chest.

“I didn’t exactly have the best dating track record in high school if you remember. In fact, I have no record at all, I’ve never even been on a date,” I said.

“What’s a better time to start than now?” she asked.

The kitchen lights turned off. Chairs scraped the floor as the group Micah was with earlier left.

She grabbed my shoulder. “Look, Nat. High school’s in the past. This is university, the time to try new things and have fun.”

“I guess.” I steepled my fingers in front of my mouth.

“Babe, the world’s your oyster. Or whatever the saying is. Text them all back.” she looked me in the eye, her amber eyes warm.

My breath bottled up in my chest.

“I think I will, Micah. Thanks.” I licked my lips with cautious hope.

“Anytime.” She slid out of the booth, “Don’t be a stranger, snap me some time. And good luck with the article.”

Right. I already agreed to make Ty look good in the article, even though throwing a water bottle at a fan was quite damning.

Who said I had to include it? I could just leave the article as is and not poke that bear. Simple as that.

I took out my phone and opened Instagram.

My thumbs slid across the screen.

Hey Alec, sober Nat here...

Here we go, Nat's replying! Let's gooooo

☐New character alert!☐Whaddya think of Micah?

What do you think about Ty throwing a water bottle at a fan?

I'm also curious about what you think Nat's business is! Lmk your guesses!

If you could do me a favour and **vote**, that'd be swell.

9 | Aye, Aye, Captain

“I feel like I’m gonna break this.” I chewed the inside of my cheek and gave the teetering box light in my hands a fixed look of concentration.

“Here, I’ve got it, you unroll the backdrop,” Layla said. She waved me away and tightened the knob attaching the head of the box light to its stand.

I pressed the heel of my palms to my eyes. “That I can do.” The plain tile floor with mildew-darkened grout and concrete walls of the arena weren’t the best background for photos.

A crack sounded when I arched my back. Tilting my head, I rolled my neck. When I signed up for this, I didn’t realize Layla’d need me at 7:00am on a Saturday, but she bought me a Tims coffee, so how could I complain?

“Have I told you how much I appreciate you helping out?” Layla clasped a hand around my forearm, “I thought I’d get Beckett to help me, but I kinda overlooked the fact that he’s on the team and has team stuff to do, or whatever, so you stepping in

is such a huge help.” Her eyes beamed with a soft inner glow.

With a swelling feeling in my chest, I avoided her steady gaze. “No problem, didn’t have anything better to do.”

Behind Layla, the box light teeter-tottered. Fudge berries!

I lunged over and grabbed the metal legs, steadying the light.

Letting out a shaky laugh, I righted the thing. Saved it.

“Thanks.” Laya dropped a sandbag on the legs of the light, “Anyways, now you get to see Sawyer.” She wiggled her brows.

Scratching my cheek, I turned away to focus on the task at hand. Echoing shouts came from the locker room, along with the clink of locks bumping against metal.

“What’re you talking about?” I asked, fumbling with the white backdrop.

“C’mon,” Layla closed her eyes and sighed, “You’re telling me nothing’s going on between you

and him?” She moved to the other end of the backdrop to help me unroll it without creasing it.

The lemony scent of antibacterial cleaner stung my nose.

“Yes. I’m telling you exactly that. Nothing at all. He’s, well, he’s Ty, and I’m Nat. That’s like saying Steve Rogers and Peggy Carter should be together. Everyone knows the Stucky bromance is way better,” I said, movements jerky as I unrolled my end in time with Layla.

We rolled out the material to the floor. I straightened, tucking an unruly strand of hair behind my ear.

“Stucky?” Layla nudged her chic, clear glasses up the bridge of her nose. She’d rock Clark Kent glasses if she had to.

My chin dipped down. “Y’know, Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes.”

The muffled thump of duffel bags and equipment being dropped on benches distracted me.

At her blank stare, I continued. “Captain America and the guy with the metal arm?”

“Ah, gotcha. But doesn’t Cap end up with Peggy Carter in the end anyway?” Layla trailed off, fiddling with the box light. She flicked one on, counteracting the bright fluorescent overhead lighting.

“I try not to think about that,” I deadpanned and sipped my now lukewarm coffee.

Layla nudged me. “Just like you try not to think about Sawyer. How many times have you seen him shirtless now?”

“I never should’ve told you about that,” I shook my head, chuckling. “And it’s only been twice, for the record.” My traitorous nerve endings stirred at the memory.

“Keeping track, are you?” Layla cocked her head.

I folded my arms, red Tims cup in hand. “You just asked me,” I accused.

“Mhm.” She pursed her lips, giving me a knowing smile.

I raised my brows and offered a questioning gaze. “Ty was nice when I was very, very drunk, but nothing will ever happen between us. Probably.”

Layla opened her mouth.

My stomach fluttered, but I held up a hand. Me + Ty = bad idea. Majorly bad idea. “End of discussion,” I said.

She shut her mouth but pouted, expression exaggerated. I couldn’t help but laugh, and she joined in, snorting along with me.

My back pocket buzzed, then dinged. I dug out my phone, familiar name crossing the screen.

Heat radiated through my chest as I swiped in to reply.

Layla leaned closer. “Who’s that?”

“Alec,” I said, delighted.

An athlete walked by, dripping sweat with a towel draped around her neck.

“Alec? Like one of your pro/con list guys, Alec?” Layla whispered in a hushed tone, words rushing out.

“Yea—” I paused. “Oh, I completely forgot to tell you!”

Layla gaped. “Yeah, you did! You texted them back?”

“I meant to tell you at the newspaper meeting on Wednesday, but since Pablo was sick, I had to help out with— you don’t need to know the details,” I rubbed the back of my neck.

Layla bounced from foot to foot.

“But, yes, I texted them all back on Tuesday, and I’ve been texting with them all week! Especially Alec,” I said.

She grabbed my arms. “Tell me everything.”

My face felt stretched from so much smiling.

“Blake takes a while to text back. Pablo’s sick, so we just texted a little. He’s hilarious. Alec is amazing, as expected,” I said, voice soft.

Layla nodded her head rapidly. “Any dates planned?”

Ribs tightening, I took a slight step back.

“Ha, you’re funny. Vaguely, with Pablo, we said we’d hang out after he gets better, but I have no clue if that’s like date-date or friends.” I frowned.

“I think you were pretty clear with your dating intentions by sending them reasons why they would

or wouldn't be good boyfriend material," she said, gleam in her eye.

"Touché." I drained the rest of the coffee, more bitter than sweet.

Layla crouched by the wall next to the backdrop. She unzipped her camera bag.

She lifted her head and blinked at me. "If things are going well with Alec, why don't you guys go out?"

I sat on the bench across from her and crossed my ankles. Good question, Layla.

She took out her camera and messed with the settings. The vending machine at the end of the hall grumbled as the athlete from earlier punched its buttons. Soon, the crinkle of a potato chip bag reached my ears.

"He hasn't asked." I gave a weak smile.

"Ask him." Layla shrugged.

"Me?" I blurted out, gripping my phone.

"You texted him first, go for it," she said. The clang of metal doors opening and slamming shut rang out.

My palms dampened. “I’ll need another bottle of tequila for that,” I joked.

“Text him, right now, so I know you’re not gonna chicken out.” She pushed her shoulders back.

Muted laughter from inside the locker room resonated in me. I pinched my bottom lip and blew my cheeks out, then released the air.

“Fine,” I said, fingers hovering over the screen. I gulped and pressed send. *Wanna hang out next weekend?*

“There, I sent it.” I set my phone down on the bench.

Layla pulled her glasses down and looked at me over the rims. Apparently pleased by what she saw, she nudged her glasses up and focussed back on setting up her camera. “Great, now can you go get Beckett from the locker room? He’s first up for headshots.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.” I mock-saluted her. My lips curled upwards as I stood. I took my empty cup with me to throw out.

As I turned the corner, another door creaked open somewhere in this maze of a basement under the

arena.

I squinted. Those voices sounded oddly familiar. Was that Ty and Will? I kept walking to the locker room— I'd have to grab them too for their headshots.

“Nat? What’re you talking about?” Ty said. I’d recognize that deep voice anywhere from the number of times it surprised me.

Coldness shocked my core. I froze, swaying slightly.

“Don’t play dumb, Sawyer,” Will said. I heard the smirk in his voice. “You and Nat—” Ty cut in.

“Are you crazy?” Ty sighed noisily.

I flinched.

“There is no me and Nat. She’s not my type at all.”

I stumbled back, vision blurring as I tried to fend off the stupid tears pricking my eyes. Pain grew in my palms from my fingernails digging into the skin. I let out a forceful breath.

Turning on my heel, I stalked away, throat tight. Way to blindside a girl, Sawyer.

I bumped into the trash can, and my spine stiffened. I slammed my cup into it.

The metal flap swung back and forth, squeaking.

I shook my head. Snap out of it, Nat! Why was he worth getting all worked up over? I didn't even like him. At all. Period, full stop.

He was absolutely right. No Ty and Nat, and I needed to remember that.

Cursing under my breath, I walked back to the photography set up, Beckett forgotten.

Sawyer could take whatever his stupid type was and shove it where the sun don't shine. Clearly, I didn't fit the bill, nor did I want to.

I stopped in front of her. "Layla, you won't believe wha—"

My phone buzzed from its spot on the bench. Our heads swivelled to look at it, then back at each other.

Alec.

I wet my lips.

Layla squealed. "Go check it!"

My pulse picked up from the Sawyer sludge I crawled through.

I grabbed the phone and swiped into the conversation. After I read the message, I dropped my butt to the bench.

I'd already had one slap in the face today, what was one more? Well, Alec used the force of a feather, whereas Sawyer wielded a sledgehammer.

My shoulders sagged. "Alec can't, he said he's busy with Pre-Law society stuff," I told Layla.

She plopped down next to me. "Well, that sucks."

Suck it did.

"I know, but I'm gonna text Blake right now." I smiled with over-bright eyes.

"You go, girl." Layla wrapped an arm around my shoulder.

My phone whooshed as I sent yet another message. Nobody, not even Sawyer, could stop me.

This chapter hit me *right in the feels*

Soooo how do you feel about this chapter? Comment and let's chat!

I'd love to know what else you're reading for some book recommendations. If you're looking for a new book to read, you can check out the comments here too and we can fangirl over books. 'Cause I'm pretty good at that, if you couldn't tell 😊

Anywho, you guys know the drill by now—please **vote**. Merci beaucoup (that's all I remember from 12 years of French classes, glad it's coming in handy).

Live long and read ☐

10 | Windows Should Be Unlocked

Layla pulled my room door shut. “Let’s pick out your outfit for your date tomorrow!”

“Right, that.” I sat on the bed, tucking one ankle behind the crook of my other knee.

My lips pressed together in a slight grimace. I twisted the lid off the carton of ice cream I grabbed in the caf and shoved my spoon in.

Layla leaned against the wall next to my closet. She crossed her arms, observing me. “You were so excited last Saturday when you messaged Blake, what happened in a week?”

“Alec happened.” I swirled the spoon in the creamy dessert, wetting my lips. “He’s so sweet and fun to talk to when he’s got time. Which isn’t a lot ’cause he’s hella busy. But I’m busy too, so it all balances out.”

“Uh-huh.” Layla raised a brow and disappeared into the closet. Voices from the courtyard came in

through the open window as other students went to and from dinner.

I leaned back, savouring the sweetness on my tongue. Chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream all the way.

Hangers scraped against metal as Layla perused the closet.

“He even gets my niche Shakespeare memes. I found an Othello one, and he loved it,” I said with an unfocused smile. My subtle online stalking paid off.

“Glad you have similar tastes. I like those Stucky edits you sent me, by the way.” Layla changed the topic, voice muffled.

“Anytime.” I crossed my legs, shifting to get comfortable. “Got some awesome Marvel fanfic too if you’re ever interested. I can hook you up.” Did I spend too much time on Wattpad when I should be sleeping or working? You betcha.

“I won’t take you up on that, but it’s the thought that counts,” she said.

“Yeah, yeah,” I laughed.

Drawers scraped opened and shut as she searched my closet. After years of wearing a uniform, this summer I bought a whole new wardrobe— basic stuff. I found what I liked and purchased it in other colours.

“How’re things with Emily?” I asked, balancing my ice cream carton in my lap. Layla hadn’t mentioned the bartender from The Cursed Night™ in a while.

She poked her head out of the closet, eyes glowing. “It’s going great! We’re going out later tonight.”

“That’s nice.” I rapped my fingers against my thigh. At least one of us had Friday night plans.

I fluffed a pillow and put it behind me to lean on.

“How about this?” Layla held up an outfit. She looked it up and down, pursing her lips.

“Never mind, this isn’t it,” she muttered to herself before I could say a word.

I picked at my chipped pink polish. “Alec just gets me, should I bother going on this date with Blake? We’ve barely texted all week.”

“You’ve gotta kiss some frogs before you find a prince,” Layla said, voice firm. She threw the black jeans and white top over her arm.

I traced the condensation on the cardboard ice cream carton, nodding along as she spoke. “I’ve found mine already, and it’s Alec.”

Layla paced in front of the bed, avoiding the shoes and crap scattered on the floor. “Blake is a practice prince.”

I rubbed my forehead. A what?

She paused mid-stride. “Okay, bad analogy, even I’m lost.”

Chuckling, I ate another spoonful of ice cream.

Layla turned to face me, braids whipping around. “All I’m saying is go on the date. The worst thing that happens is you waste a couple hours of your Saturday.”

Her features tightened as she awaited my response, an argument in the hallway bleeding through the walls.

“I guess,” I mumbled, looking down at my now soupy ice cream, chocolate chunks floating around.

“I’ve never been on a date before though, what do I do?”

She hopped on the bed next to me, bedsprings chirping. “Hm. It’s like you’re hanging out with a friend you’re attracted to plus flirting.”

The arguing voices outside faded, and the slam of a door shook the wall behind my back.

“That’s not super helpful.” I wrinkled my nose. I’d appreciate a step-by-step PDF, thank you very much.

“Trial by fire, girl.” Layla shrugged and went back into my closet.

My heartbeat throbbed as I chewed the inside of my cheek. “Also not helpful. I’d rather be prepared, so I don’t get burned.”

A breeze ruffled the papers on my desk. I unfolded my legs and pulled the window shut, rusty metal hinges protesting.

“A few burns here and there are inevitable, but one thing you can do is have a bomb outfit,” she said.

“Ah, yes.” I settled back on the bed, facing the closet. “How’s it going in there?”

“Meh. Where are you going again?”

I blew out a breath that rattled my lips. “Karma.” A.K.A., the club Will wanted to go on The Cursed Night™.

“Yikes, interesting choice.” She let out a derisive snort.

“He picked it, not me.” I rubbed the back of my neck.

Layla came back out of the closet, footsteps shuffling. “I don’t doubt you there.”

My mouth flattened in a slight grimace.

She planted her hands on her hips. “Well, the outfit I was thinking of is a bust. It’s more dinner-y.”

“I haven’t even decided if I’m going.”

Layla grinned. “Yes, you are going, and I know the perfect outfit for you.”

Abort mission. I repeat abort.

I turned around to face the other girl in the washroom. She rested an arm on the condom and tampon machine. Don’t know if I’d wanna touch that, sister.

“What’re you doing?” she repeated, pulling up the spaghetti strap of her short, silky dress that clung to all her curves. Stumbling closer, she tilted her head to the side.

My jaw ached from clenching my teeth.

“It always works in the movies.” I shoved the window, metal rattling.

“What?” she asked, yelling over the D.J.’s announcement coming over the loudspeaker. The heavy bass pounded through the washroom door.

“You know, climbing out the window ’cause I’m on the worst date in recorded history?” I folded my arms across my chest and glared at the window, moonlight reflecting off the pane.

She giggled. “You’re funny.”

“I’ll be here all night, folks.” I gestured, arms wide.

Her friend came over with a damp line on the front of her shirt from the counter. The fumes coming off her could knock out a grown man.

I blinked. How was she functioning?

“The best way to get out of a crappy date is to get your friend to call you. Or fake a text emergency and dash,” the newcomer said, eyes round, with very few blinks.

Alrighty then.

I shrugged half-heartedly. Believe me, washroom stranger— I would’ve done that if I could. “My phone’s dead, so I had to put a pin in that plan.”

“I guess climbing out the window is your best bet, then,” she replied, nodding.

My lips flattened. “Too bad it’s locked shut.”

“Yeah, sucks. Good luck with that!” She cleared her throat and tugged her friend away.

Toilets flushed and gurgled as they refilled.

My shoulders slumped. Ugh.

I washed my hands, stray hair strands clinging to the white sink. Ew. Pink soap oozed out of dispensers and streaked the sinks.

Time to go back out and face Blake. I almost physically shuddered.

A blurry Nat stared back at me in an aged mirror that was losing its silver. Even the cute crop top Layla found me couldn't improve this night. Usually, I thought crop tops showed off too much of my chub, but with my high-rise blue jeans and Layla's encouragement, I looked pretty damn good.

I ripped off a scratchy paper towel.

Staring down at my feet, I shook my head. I thought it'd be the two of us, me and Blake, but he brought along friends. Not my definition of a date.

I tossed the paper towel into a garbage bin overflowing with used brown wads. My teeth bit down on my bottom lip. Only copious amounts of alcohol could get me through the rest of our mind-numbingly boring conversation.

I pushed open the door to the masses, and pulsing strobe lights greeted me. Pressing against people to move past them, I passed everyone from waitresses dressed skimpily with glowing trays of shooters to pairs making out uninhibitedly.

Finally, I emerged victorious at the bar.

I scanned the length of the bar while I waited for a bartender. My eyes landed on a familiar dark-haired boy, and my head jerked back. I turned away

to hide my face. Please don't see me, please don't see me, please don't—

“Hey, Nat!” Will called out, voice loud and demanding my attention.

My stomach dropped.

Slowly, I turned back around and scraped a hand through my loose curls. I gave a small wave, a tight smile on my lips.

“Come here, I'll buy you a drink.” He waved me over.

I stared at nothing for an overlong moment. On a scale of 1-10, how rude would it be to pretend I didn't hear Will? Probably a ten, 'cause people were staring at this point.

Looking back at Will, I tucked my hair out of my face. With Sawyer nowhere in sight, I shuffled over.

Will set down his beer, glass clunking against a table. He clapped me on the back. “What're you drinking?”

Behind the bar, a glass fell and shattered. I cringed, head pulling back as my shoulders pushed forward.

“Vodka cran.” I focussed back on him with my default response. The conversation Sawyer and Will had last Saturday banged around my skull.

Bottles of booze lined the mirrored wall behind the bar, neon lights distracting. Will caught the attention of the bartender and ordered my drink.

He turned back to me, head tipping to the side as he leaned on the bar. “I have to say, I’m surprised to see you here.”

“Why?” I squinted at him, brow lowering. Why couldn’t I be here too, huh?

The bartender held out my red drink, and I took it, glass cold against my fingertips.

“Karma’s not your scene, per se.” Will motioned at the club.

I turned, elbow resting on the counter. Small round tables with stools stood around the perimeter, discarded beer cans and bottles left forgotten. People danced, if you called jumping up and down dancing, on the floor and atop special platforms. The whole place had dark-hued walls with neon signs scattered around.

Okay, maybe he had a point.

I released a long exhale. “You’re not wrong.”

“So why are you here?” he asked, bending closer to hear. Will wasn’t quite as tall as Sawyer, but both had a good four or five inches on my 5’9 “frame.

I sipped my drink, leaning away from him. “Why do you care?”

Before Will could answer, Sawyer melted out of the crowd. Oh, great. Think of the giant, and he shall appear. Just what I needed tonight.

I lifted my chin, posture stiff.

Sawyer came up on my other side. “What’re you talking about?”

“Nat here was about to tell me why she’s at Karma,” Will said, bumping shoulders with me. I turned back to face the bar, elbows resting on the black counter.

“Right, Will.” I inhaled deeply, nostrils flaring. “I’m here on a date.”

“A date?” Sawyer’s eyes widened before he schooled his expression.

I fidgeted with a napkin. Yeah, buddy, just ’cause I’m not your type doesn’t mean other guys don’t like

me.

“Why is that so surprising?” I cut my eyes to Sawyer, a hard edge to my tone.

Sawyer tucked his hands in his pockets, giving me a sidelong glance.

On *The Cursed Night*TM, I did make that whole eighty-year-old virgin with no boyfriend comment.

“I don’t see any date,” Sawyer said.

“He’s over there.” I threw a hand up in the vague direction of where I’d seen Blake last. My fingers tightened around my glass.

Will wandered away. Bye to you too! Thanks for leaving me with Sawyer.

“Vodka cran?” Sawyer smirked. “Would’ve pegged you with something more original than that, Sunshine.”

Guess you don’t know me then, Sawyer, “I scowled.

In front of me, a bartender dug into the ice and grabbed a nozzle. The spray of an unknown liquid filling a glass hissed.

Sawyer rubbed his jaw. “How’s your date going?”

“None of your business.” I stared straight ahead at a bowl of lemon and lime wedges.

My chest tightened, neck prickling with his gaze on me.

He said nothing, but he was the type where his silence told me more than his words.

Coloured lights flashed in the reflection of the mirrored wall behind the bar. Phones buzzed, voices overlapped, and I stewed. My hands balled into fists.

“Nat—” he started.

I whipped my head to meet his gaze. “The date sucks, alright?”

Sawyer flinched, the movement so slight that maybe I imagined it. My throat tightened.

“It’s your fault I’m here anyway.” I jabbed the air for emphasis.

“Huh?” he grunted.

My lips pressed into a white slash. Why did everything in here have to be so loud? I tapped the

tabletop.

“You and your stupid dare started all this! If you hadn’t dared me to text my crushes, I would never have texted Blake in the first place, and I wouldn’t be here trying to escape out the bathroom window. Which is nailed shut, for your information. Isn’t that a fire safety violation? Whatever. Moral of the story, you started all this, Sawyer,” I said, drawing out every syllable of his name.

He flexed his fingers, Adam’s apple bobbing as he searched for words.

“I told you to text what’s his name, Alex.” He dragged a hand through his hair.

“Alec,” I cut in, folding my arms across my chest.

He levelled me with a dry stare. “Same difference. I have no culpability in this date happening.”

I opened my mouth to criticize but stopped short. My heartbeat picked up.

Over Sawyer’s shoulder, the green-eyed blonde I came here with weaved through the crowd. Blake.

“Crap, he’s coming over,” I hissed through clenched teeth.

“Who? Your date?” Sawyer followed my gaze over his shoulder. “Don’t you like him?”

My shoulders curled over my chest. “I met Blake on one very drunk night during orientation week. He was hot until he opened his mouth.”

“Right.” Sawyer moved closer. I shifted back.

“Hey Nat, there you are!” Blake said as he broke through from the crowd.

I swallowed the lump in my throat.

“Hi Blake, I was just getting a drink.” I gave a tight smile, holding up said drink.

“Chill.” Blake nodded, coming up beside me. “Hey, man.”

He did the weird-man-chin-nod to Sawyer, who didn’t return the gesture.

My eyes darted between the two, tongue darting out to wet my lips.

“Uh, Blake, this is Sawyer, Sawyer, this is Blake.” I pointed between them.

Sawyer said nothing.

“He lives on my floor,” I explained to Blake, rubbing the back of my neck.

Blake raked a hand through his hair. “You play hockey, right?”

“Yeah.” Sawyer looked at me, blue eyes unreadable, but what else was new?

Aaaand he said nothing else. Amazing social skills, bro.

“Okay, so—” I said.

Blake interrupted. “We’re gonna head back to Quinn’s place, ready Nat?”

Ew, no.

I clutched my drink. “Uh—”

“Nat’s coming back to the dorms with me,” Sawyer cut in.

Blake bobbed his head.

I grabbed Blake’s arm to keep him from leaving. “No, I’m not.”

He gave me a look, but clearly, we weren't on the same wavelength. Who did Sawyer think he was?

"Yes, you just said you were," he said, drawing out the words.

Tryna weasel me out of this? Well, I didn't need his help.

"Changed my mind," I snapped.

"That was fast." Sawyer thumbed his ear.

"I'm decisive." I released Blake's arm. "And smart. Really, I'm a great person."

Blake's eyes ping-ponged between us.

"Never said you weren't," he said, brows drawing together.

"Mhm." I dropped my empty glass on the counter. "Bye, Sawyer."

I marched outside, and Blake followed. A line of people waited outside the establishment under skeletal trees. A girl took cover fees and stamped hands with the club's logo.

Turning to face Blake, I rubbed at the logo on my own hand.

“Blake, I had a good time tonight, but I’m gonna take an Uber back to the dorms,” I sighed.

His gaze clouded. “But I thought you said that—”

“I know, I changed my mind.” I waved a hand, then wrapped my arms around myself.

“Oh. Want me to come with you?” Blake glanced at his group of friends that were waiting for him.

“No.” I rushed out, stumbling back a step. “No, it’s okay, I only had one drink,” I said, slower. As nice as the offer was, I didn’t want to bring Blake back to my dorm.

I used Blake’s phone to order my Uber since my phone died.

I shuffled under an awning to wait. Within minutes, it pulled up. I double-checked that the license plate matched and gave Blake back his phone.

“Chill. See you around,” he called out over his shoulder.

I tugged open the car door.

“Uber for Natasha?” I asked.

I threw a glance over my shoulder. A familiar, unreadable face stood outside by the club, brownish-blond hair mussed,

“Yes, Natasha Chabra,” the balding driver said.

I scrubbed a hand over my face, then turned back to climb into the car.

Sneaking out the window would’ve been so much easier.

Sometimes, sneaking out the window is the only option (me @ every family get together ever)

Thoughts on Chapter 10? Whaddya think of Blake? Layla, Will & Ty made appearances too.

Also, thoughts on the chapter divider? My sister drew it for me to match the chapter, so keep an eye out for those in future chapters... if I can convince her to make me more. I’m competing with her Animal Crossing time, so we’ll see.

Anywho, if this chapter was somewhat bearable, leave a **vote** to let me know!

11 | Waffle Cones > Sugar Cones

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12 | wikiHow Sucks

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13 | The Sawyer Experience

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14 | RIP Nat's Dignity

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16 | Out With The Old, In With The New

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17 | Foam Mustaches & Flirting

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18 | Dimples & Backward Baseball Caps

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19 | The First Second Date

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20 | Mission Boyfriend Accomplished

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21 | Will The Problem Solver

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22 | Hydrate or Diedrate

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23 | The Four-Letter Word Of Doom

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24 | Keep Going

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25 | Tear In My Heart

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26 | Dig Deep

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27 | I'm Not A Pokémon Card

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28 | Washroom = Party Central

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29 | Be Brave

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30 | #YOLO Maybe?

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31 | All This Time

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32 | I'm Trying

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33 | See Through The Smoke

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34 | Pro/Con List Take Two

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35 | Embrace The Awkward

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Final Author's Note

Wow.

I can't believe JPS is over. Finished. Complete.

Eighty-one thousand two hundred and eleven words. 81,211 words.

It's possible I'm still in shock.

Honestly, I couldn't have finished this book without your constant support and encouragement. When writing and life got hard, you've been there for me.

The idea for JPS came to me when my first year of university was cut short by the whole, y'know, pandemic. I was trudging through my final exams and sad that the year never really felt *complete*. To take my mind off things, I came back to Wattpad—I used to read on here when I was like 13. JPS was my escape.

I never expected my lil kernel of an idea to become, well, this. (I can't believe I'm tearing up a little writing this I'M SO SAPPY)

This was my first story on Wattpad, and I know it won't be the last. I love writing and I love this kind, supportive community we've built.

So, thank you to those of you who've been here since day 1 of me fumbling around trying to figure out how to reply to comments, and those of you who binge-read the entire book today. I appreciate you so, so much for letting me share my lil story with you.

I started with 1 read. Then 100. Then 1,000. And now, 700,000+. I'm honestly mind-blown that we have so many amazing people here in my lil corner of Wattpad. It's totally insane.

If you enjoyed JPS, please drop a review in the comments to be featured on my social media & it'll def make me smile →

Anywho, I'm off to write some more 'cause guess what?

Nat's story isn't over yet.



Also By Nikki Pierce

Have you read them all?

THE NIGHT WE MET

Take me back to... the night we met.

Contains spoilers for JPS — this is a prequel scene to be read after JPS!

The first time you meet Nat and Ty in Just Press Send isn't the first time they met, but this is. Experience their first encounter through Ty's eyes in THE NIGHT WE MET.

Become a VIP Reader on **www.nikkipiercebooks.com** to get this **exclusive scene** delivered right to your inbox!

THE ART OF HATING YOU

All's fair in love and publicity.

THE INTERN

After a career-ending injury, sixteen-year-old Shay Gupta's hopes at the Olympics are crushed. Despite becoming @FamousFumbles, one of Toronto's most popular Instagrammers, Shay is determined to wallow in self-pity. Since she keeps her pithy social commentary posts a secret, her parents force her into a summer internship at Gupta Media, her aunt's company. She may be an expert at life behind a keyboard, but reality? Good luck with that.

THE ROCKSTAR

With a life in the spotlight, seventeen-year-old Flynn Hudson wants nothing more than to be left alone with his motorcycle and guitar. But, after a string of not-so-great decisions, his reputation went from bad boy rockstar to reckless rich kid. On a "break" from his world tour, Flynn's parents move him to Toronto for a fresh start. Only, there's no deleting your past, and Flynn can't avoid @FamousFumbles anonymous criticism...

THE COLLISION

When Flynn's parents hire Gupta Media to clean up his image, the last thing he expects is to run into @FamousFumbles, the Instagrammer who didn't catch him on his best day. As the only one who knows her hidden identity, he can't wait to make her life hell when she's assigned to his PR team.

How far will Shay go to keep her online persona a secret? And what happens when the lines between reality and a PR campaign are blurred? This is war, uh, publicity, baby.

This was an entry for the #ShawRocketFund Contest and will be on hold while I work on JPS

THESE LIES WE CREATE

The lies we create live.

The lies we create breathe.

The lies we create rebel.

These are their stories.

THESE LIES WE CREATE is a collection of short stories with sci-fi and dystopian elements. The collection is continually growing, but each story is complete in itself.

**MORE COMING SOON... (hints on
www.nikkipiercebooks.com☺)**

(*cough* Summit University *Series* *cough*)

Acknowledgements & Reader Hall Of Fame

To be honest, writing a whole entire 80,000-word long book is harder than I thought it would be, but also and more rewarding than I could've ever imagined.

If you wanna read about me gush more, that's in my last author's note, this is a space to thank a few of you who really made a huge difference while I was posting JPS. Your encouragements, your comments, your support— it means everything to me.

@nonfictionalex — My first friend on Wattpad. Alex, you showed me the ropes and encouraged me so much to keep writing.

@veeee311 — Vanessa. I appreciate you so, so much. I don't know what else to say other than thank you for being here from basically the first day I posted JPS to now.

@Special_Is_Me — YOUR COMMENTS! I love them so much, they always make me smile. ♥

@SamanthaXElena — SAM. Sam, Sam, Sam, you've supported me so much, messaged me, hyped me up when I was feeling down. Thank you.

@wonder_718 — You leave such kind comments about my writing, it makes me want to keep improving.

I wish I could write this for every single one of you, but I've got more words to write😊, so I'll keep it brief.

I want to say a huge thank you to those of you who've commented and voted ***on almost every single chapter of JPS***. You were there the minute I updated, left such encouraging comments, and kept me writing Nat's story. Thank you.

@apolloswifee, @SouthMarie,
@rosa_annoyinga, @LesbianJuliet88, @mincinn,
@EkralcKid, @padfootno, @Just_Madde,
@_pankhurigoel_, @_nguwasen, @nyssavaeh,
@JustAnotherGirImcg, @Fabigail1218,
@mirajohannaa, @_veloci_, @AndreaBrightAuthor,
@katprobert, @mistywater045, @sapphires-in-the-sea,
@_known_unknown_, @inkdropsintherain,
@hidi622722, @Ambiefluffyy, @chasingcastles,
@foreverengaged2pizza, @scared_skies,
@celadon_valley, @marelisaucedo,

@_Fantasy_Dragon_, @SummerDarcyWrites,
@loulett, @EmmyKatie, @PurpleButyerfly21,
@golden_shower001, @dubbubmups,
@booksrmorgan, @strawb3rrie, @Instanatick,
@Lavender-Violet, @pizza_salad, @n0t-LikE-
0tHer_g1rls, @washed_out_soul

And last of all, thank you to my family, especially my mom for being my #1 cheerleader and my sister for her artwork in JPS!

This is a list of readers who have voted, commented, added JPS to a reading list, or followed me while JPS was ongoing. You'll forever hold a special lil place in my heart for helping me write this novel. Thank you so, so much to all 2,257 of you.

P.S. I alphabetized the list cause I'm extra like that, so it's not in order of earliest reader, which I also debated doing haha

BOOK 2 is up! | Just Call Me

https://youtu.be/hrQp_z_vHhg

Summit University Series Book 2: **JUST CALL ME**

(Whaddya think of the cover? Do you like it?)

Love is messy.

The last person Natasha Chabra expected was to fall for Ty, the arrogant, hot-headed, hockey boy. Well, scratch that. Turns out Ty's not what Nat thought at all. The real Ty has carved out a place in Nat's heart, making her question everything she believes about love.

Dealing with busy lives, meddling families, and interfering exes, Nat and Ty have rocky waters to navigate. Nat can't even Google Maps herself to the nearest Tims, so good luck with navigating a minefield of secrets, half-truths, and not-so-little white lies.

Oh, and how could Nat forget about the last boy to reply to her pro/con list? Logan, Nat's childhood

crush, reenters her life, making those rocky waters one hundred thousand percent choppier.

In this unforgettable sequel to Just Press Send, love may be messy, but it's a broken, brilliant, beautiful mess.

Read Just Call Me today for a college romance with a sprinkle of humour and a dash of sass!

Link in the comments, hope you enjoy!

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